TATTOO BLADE

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Raws Provided by aNobody101

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Prologue

The impact struck from the seabed.
Waves of rattles rock the Atlantic, and slaughtered shoals of fish stain the deep sea with fresh blood.
The steel hulls diving in the midst of it were also on the verge of capsizing in terror.

“ A shockwave! “
The adjutant shouts at the launch station as the red emergency lights twinkle.
The German Navy's second class U-boat 5888 is an up-and-coming submarine that has just been completed.
Its mighty hull is about to be crushed with a baby-like screech.
The radio operator, who was holding a receiver to his ear, turned around with a very pale face.
"I don't understand! The depth is too deep for a bomb attack!"
While the hull creaks and squeaks, the issuing office receives screaming reports from various parts of the submarine.
"It's the engine room! Propulsion power has dropped to 60%! Manual restoration in progress!
Flooding in residential areas! Wards 2 and 4 are closed for drainage!"

The captain and his crew are all fierce warriors who have been accustomed to fighting underwater for many years.
Even though the hull of the ship is about to be crushed, they’re strong enough to calmly carry out the mission and survive.
Still, there was an uneasiness swirling in their chests that they did not usually feel.
“Where is the enemy ship? Did the sonar not pick them up?"
At the captain’s question, the radio operator removed his headphones slightly and shook his head.
"No, I don't see any ships on the surface of the sea. Perhaps an anti-submarine patrol..."
"This doesn’t make any sense. The Azores, where the enemy air base is located, are still far away. These are our waters.“
It's not like a detonation or a mine contact. On the contrary, there is not even a hint of the enemy.
As if to mock their fear, a stronger shockwave struck U588.
The radio operator, hearing the roar properly, screams and falls off his chair.
“Oh my God!!!”
As blood spurted from the operator’s eardrums, the captain held him up as he struggled.
“Can you hear what I’m saying?!” the adjutant asked.
“I’ll take him to the infirmary myself!” A young sailor tried to carry out the fallen radio operator, but was grabbed by the collar and forcefully pulled down.

A slender man in a black uniform stood before the stunned sailor and the adjutant.
"Do not leave your post without permission! Same goes for the operator!"
The young officer with the high-pitched voice looked down at the adjutant in a coquettish manner.
“The first thing you need to do is to find out what the impact was. Identify whether it was an enemy attack!"
“You’re insane!”
For some reason, the adjutant showed condescending anger toward the supposedly younger officer.
“He’s done his duty. You can't force him to do more!"
“If he’s done with his duty then there is no air for him to breathe on this submarine. And, subsequently, no medical treatment."
There was a sense of disquiet in the U588's launching station.
The black uniforms worn by the young officers are from a different organization than those of the crew.
Armed SS. And a fool who has been thoroughly indoctrinated with Nazi doctrine.
The SS officer cornered the adjutant, not caring about the cold stares of the crew.
“Make it easy on them!” he said and laughed. “Make it easy on one, and he'll have more than his share of what little food we have left.”
'These are the people I have fought side by side with all my life, and I would never let anyone who is more than family to me just die like that!”
'This ship is under the jurisdiction of our armed SS... No, it is under the jurisdiction of His Excellency. As I am His Excellency's adjutant, my orders are absolute."
“...The war is long over!"
The adjutant glanced at the date on his calendar. June 6, 1945.
It has been exactly one year since the Allied landings at Normandy.
Their home country, Germany, had already been defeated and scorched to the ground a month earlier.
Even the Führer was killed when he was pinched by Soviet forces from the east and U.S. and British allied forces from the west.
On board the U588, still on duty, however, the SS officer put his hand on his pistol.
“Orders are absolute until the mission is over… Argh!” In mid-sentence, the SS officer let out an anguished cry, his wrist twisted by someone's strong arm as he tries to pull out the pistol.
The SS officer turned around to see the fearless face of the captain, Navy Commander Karl Rossbach.
“Indeed, we are fighting at His Excellency's behest. But neither His Excellency nor you, boy, are sailors – and if you forgot, this is a deep-sea battlefield. Shut up and listen to what the submariner has to say."
“Let go of me! I'll report you for your insolence!”
“Go ahead and do as you please. His Excellency should be awake by now."
Captain Rossbach carelessly released his hand, throwing the SS officer to the side. Then he turned on his heel and looked back at his veteran crew of a hundred battles.

“Sailor, take the operator to the infirmary. Adjutant, take over the radio. Everybody - combat alert, increase speed!"

Suddenly, the crew is reinvigorated and the command post comes to life.
Rossbach sat down in the captain's chair and pulled his military cap down over his eyes - this submarine was an extension of him and the crew were his children.
Karl thought to himself – “I will not let a stranger, even if he is a member of the SS, have free reign.”
As the SS officer left to escape the captain’s gaze, the adjutant grabbed the receiver.
“Captain, is this an attack of the Allies?”
“No… Looks more like an undersea volcanic eruption than an attack”
I've never heard such a sound, though... – Rossbach added in his mind - The Azores, which we are about to pass through, is the only volcanic island group in the Atlantic…
“Azimuth and depth, out. We're close."
When he finally got the adjutant's report, Rossbach raised his eyebrows.
“We’re not anywhere near close. How the… This is ridiculous! Is it rising?"
The source of the shock wave detected by sonar was changing its position every second - from the depths of the deep sea and to it’s very surface…
Rossbach listened to the receiver himself. Still a lot of underwater static noise - but through it all, something stirs, something akin to an ominous roar.
“Adjutant, we're going up to periscope depth.”
“We’re going to surface already?”
The puzzled adjutant looked over at his pocket watch and winced.
“It’s dawn already... Even if the shockwave is not an attack by the Allies, there’s a good chance that a ship or aircraft of some other nation will notice it visually.”
“There’s no flooding on the submarine, but the shockwave may have caused cracks in the hull. I'd like to check."
“But we are on a classified mission!” The adjutant warned the determined captain in a somewhat hushed voice.
“Mustn't any of them discover us until we deliver Him to the destination?”
Indeed - His Excellency... Rossbach stroked his stubble bitterly.
Convoying only one person. That was U588's last mission.
The war of U588 is still going on to get that man out of defeated Germany - and His Excellency has yet to tell U588 his destination.
“Adjutant, have you been told our destination? For a week already, we have been forced to make these endless circumnavigations through the waters by order of His Excellency, but we are in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. There is no land nearby.” Rossbach has no hesitation in obeying an order issued by a sane person - but who can say for sure that His Excellency is sane?
After all, his Excellency commanded only one word. Go to the Promised Land.

"It’s dangerous to continue sailing without inspecting the damage to the hull. Periscope depth, adjutant."

Rossbach repositioned his military cap and patted the adjutant's shoulder with a complicated look on his face.

"Don't look so worried. If this ship sinks, your Excellency will not make it to its destination.”

At the moment he said this, the sound of hard shoes echoed directly behind Rossbach.

"Of course, captain. I agree with you.”

Rossbach turned around. A man in a military uniform held out his hands in a theatrical pose in front of him.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Compared to the shockwave we just got hit by, a Soviet multiple rocket launcher seems like a child's play. Please check the situation at once.”

A man in his forties, wearing the uniform of an ordinary Wehrmacht infantry colonel. But of course, that dress doesn't reflect his true status. The uniform was probably snatched from a corpse to hide his true identity when escaping the burning Berlin - he had every reason to do so and every talent to make a successful escape.

Every time Captain Rossbach thinks of the talent of this distinguished guest, he feels an unspeakable chill run down his spine. How is it that he's the only one who managed to escape this far?

Intercepted Allied radio broadcasts report the capture of Reichsführer Goering and Oberstgruppenführer Himmler. Propaganda Minister Goebbels is heard to have poisoned his own children and then burned himself to death. Everyone in Germany would have been on their deathbeds, including the Führer. And His Excellency, too, have witnessed the Führer's death. So how is it that he's the only one who has survived?

The guest of honor smiled back at Rossbach while the latter thought of this.

"I have a gift for you, captain.” The guest of honor gave a cold smile to Rossbach, who hid his nervousness.

"The talent to perceive danger, to avoid danger, to make danger your ally. That is why I made it out of Berlin alive. That is HOW I got out of Berlin alive. It's time for me to emerge now."

"But I instructed lieutenant Greiner, the adjutant, to find out what the shockwave was..."

"My orders take absolute precedence over his. You'll understand it once we surface."

“So you say there is no danger?” When Rossbach asked, the guest of honor shook his head leisurely and readjusted his pose.

"No, it's dangerous. There is tremendous danger. I know it.”

“Then we'll surface at...”

"I told you, captain. You must have danger on your side if you wish to survive.”

The voice of the guest of honor gradually grew irritable, and there was a spark of evil in his shining eyes.

"I cannot win with the powerless on my side. What I need is someone dangerous but powerful. That is why I survived so long in the Führer bunker."

The adjutant announced that sufficient reconnaissance depth had been reached. Rossbach turns to the periscope to probe the sea surface situation. But the Atlantic Ocean, which should have been illuminated by the light of dawn, was simply covered in pure white.

"Dense fog. Too thick to see anything..." Said Rossbach while moving the periscope, looking into a blank white field of vision. Despite the previous shockwaves, the surface of the sea is strangely calm.

The source of the shockwave must also be near the surface of the sea. Just when Rossbach thought that, a black shadow loomed out from deep within the dense fog.

No way... No way... No way, Rossbach keeps thinking in astonishment.

“Is that... an island?”

Anxiety overtook the submarine. For everyone knew that there was no island in here. But a kilometer ahead, Rossbach saw a rocky island, black and wet and shiny. Surrounded by sheer cliffs, the island presented a strange sight of sword-like rocky mountains overlapping each other, the surface of the rocks covered with dense white shellfish - including the mountaintops!

It looks as if it had been at the bottom of the sea just recently.

Rossbach's mouth, which had been staring at the island even more, squeezed out a trembling voice.

"Oh, God..."

His gaze caught a square block of rock hidden among the boulders. Though half-collapsed and half-crushed, the square rock is clearly an artificial construction. Even Rossbach, who knew nothing about archaeology, could sense something strange about the architectural style. The ruins before him did not resemble any known civilization and seemed more evil than anything else.

“Let me see, skipper.”

When Rossbach handed over the periscope, the guest of honor gave a satisfied, cold smile, then exhale deep, loud breaths with both shoulders.

"Captain, prepare to land." said the guest of honor, crossing his arms on his chest. “Rejoice! The Promised Land is upon us!"

Rossbach listened in amazement to the words of his guest of honor, thinking - "was it not you who tried to exterminate the Jewish people who were supposed to go to the Promised Land? where is this Promised Land you speak of? Who is the God who promised you?"

Rossbach fought back a terrible chill and looked at the ship's clock.

What a bad joke. June 6, 6:00 a.m.

New Testament. The number of the beast as described in Revelation, chapter 13.

Rossbach thought back to his young daughters who learned it in Sunday school. He wondered if those children were safe and sound. Whether he would see his daughter again.
With anxiety and fear, the U588 began to surface in a sea of thick fog.

【Chapter 1】

“No one saw you, did they?”
When asked, the man who entered the room steadfastly took a stance.
"I took a cab and the monorail as usual. There was no indication that I was followed."
"Can never be too sure. You'll have to take more than one route to get here."
Five white people were relaxing in an inconspicuous house out in the backstreets - all plainly dressed, but with sharp eyes and sturdy physiques.
The man who seemed to be the ringleader of the group cautiously opened the curtains of the window slightly.
"Our previous enemies are nothing more than a distraction."
Outside the window, one could see the city lights and an uniquely shaped opera house.
Sydney was celebrating a hot new year of 2000 - the sea breeze blew pleasantly, but the headman would not open the window.
"Now that we are all here, I will pass on the orders from headquarters."
The headman laid the papers out on the table.
A sigh of relief escaped from the rest of the men.
"Thank goodness. Can we finally leave Australia?"
"The heat is unbearable for us, Germans, you know."
The man holding up an automatic rifle smiled, letting the scars on his face do the talking.
"So, where's our next assignment?"
"The location is Tokyo... but we're not going to kidnap someone Japanese. The target is a white person, just like us."
Mixed in with the maps and airline tickets, a dozen or so photographs were among the papers presented. They are all concealed shots of the same person. Looking at them, the man with the rifle let out a jolly whistle.
"Oh, damn..."
Just as he said that, there was a light knock on the door. As if on cue, three knocks, twice.
" Fritz, who is it?"
The name called out was the watchman who was supposed to be outside the door, but the moment the door lock clicked open, countless bullets smashed through the door, and a man with gunshot wounds all over his body fell right back through the door with a spray of blood - at the same time, the window glass shattered and more shots struck the men inside. The man with the automatic rifle was unable to react and was shot through the brain.
In just a few seconds, every German in the room turned into a bloody mess.
"Ascalon 3, success."
"Ascalon 8, success."

A man in black combat uniform, no, eight of them showed up inside without making a sound of footsteps. The movements to confirm death and examine personal belongings of the Germans were frighteningly agile. They are accustomed to murder - all the operatives wielded MP7SD9 short machine guns with silencers.

The helmets they wore, which completely covered their face, were also equipped with an automatic sighting device.

"Ascalon Leader to all NCO's. All targets confirmed killed. No damage. We will now seize the relevant documents. Continue to seal off the area."

The man, who seems to be the commander, spoke to the microphone on his helmet, then one of his subordinates nodded as he gathered up his papers.

"We got everything. They've got airline tickets to Tokyo, and now they were going to kidnap someone in Japan. This is the third one they've done this year. There's no end to what they're planning."

As the commander pushed away a table splattered with blood, several photographs slipped to the floor. The commander picked one up, stained with fresh blood, and looked at it.

"This girl...!"

The voice was of disbelief, but no matter how many pictures the commander flipped through, they were all of the same person. When the commander checked the contents of the documents, he exhibited an unusual nervousness.

"How did they realize you were alive... after hiding your whereabouts for 12 years... Why..."

Only the deputy reacts to the commander's words:

"Is this girl someone you know?.."

"Oh... I thought they had forgotten about it, too..."

But how did this happen? The commander wondered, and that's when it happened - the commander was called by his original name. It was a scream.

"Major Hadley!" shouted one of the people examining the bodies.

Someone's fingernails ripped into the man's arm. It was the claw of the ringleader, who had just been shot.

"Don't... get in the way of... I'm not going to let you get in our way..."

The ringleader, who rose up, glared at Major Hadley, his left eye dangling from the orbit by nerve fibers. Fresh blood flowed from his abdomen, and pink organs were hanging from the wound. And yet, the ringleader is still standing up. He is smiling. He has willpower.

Without regard to more screams, the ringleader ripped the arm off the black soldier's body and lunged at Major Hadley, displaying inhuman strength and speed.

"We're going to the Promised Land!"

But there was not a trace of fear on Major Hadley's face - he pulled from his waist a Belgian-made 5.7mm automatic pistol, FN 57.

"There is no Promised Land for the likes of you."

The guns on both sides roared at the same time, aimed at the ringleader neck - an accurate shot pierces through the brain of the leader. With that, the brain plasma-spattered ringleader slammed against the wall and collapsed.

"So, the Immortals still hold command..."
For some reason, white steam begins to exhume from the head of the ringleader's corpse.
Looking down at the no-longer-moving ringleader, the Major almost felt sorry.
"The enemy of our agency are not human beings. Keep that in mind."
The subordinate whose arm was ripped off is hurriedly carried away by the others.
The Major's mouth was closed as he looked away bitterly from the scene.
"Contact Tokyo. This is not the time to give up on them."
"Are you going to Japan? But I'm pretty sure this girl has a..."
When the second-in-command tried to warn him, Major Hadley just nodded.
'Oh, she does have the most dependable bodyguard on the planet. But..."
Wanting to make sure of something, the major rolled the corpse of the ringleader on his toes. The badge rolls out of the leader's pocket with a bounce, and the Major stomped on it. The shape of the badge was, indeed, a swastika.

In the early morning, Ueno Park was covered with a humid June-like atmosphere. At 6 a.m. on a Friday morning, there is still not a soul around. Wait, no, just one guy in this heat, wearing a black tracksuit - he even had a hood over his head and was barefoot despite being in a grove of trees.
The face is undecipherable. Tall. Well-proportioned body. He lifted his arms with ease and twisted them in a strange way, turning his wrists as if kneading something, dropping his hips, and twisting the upper body as well. Every observer was stunned by these graceful movements.
"There's no mistaking, it's the guy from last time."
"Can't make out the face, but the movements are the same. I think it's Tai Chi."
The five or six observers all have strong bodies. The back of their shirts, wrapping around their fearless bodies all read Gladiators - but behind them was a giant of a man who looked not only fearless, but also ferocious.
"Tai chi is a great martial art."
He is 195 centimeters tall. Hanging eyes and a brutal smile. The huge man, who looked like a large refrigerator, pushed away the men around him. He said, "Tai chi has enough power to kill people, too. You're in a lot of pain because you picked it."
"Well, maybe we're the ones at fault..." - said one man in a frightened voice - "I'm pretty sure I got drunk and started messing around with that guy. But..."
"But I don't think we're going to slam anything into the Shinobazu Pond - is that what you want to say?" The huge man with a short-cropped head of hair smiled wryly.
The next moment, he pulled man near him by the collar and lifted him into the air.
"No excuses. You may be a new member, but you're still a pro, right?"
"P-Put me down!"
"And you're wearing the Gladiators insignia,' the big man added - "Good thing it's early in the morning, but try to get his attention or else the face of our organization will be destroyed."
"I'm sorry, Kodera-san!"

The giant man, who, apparently, was Kodera-san, licked his tongue.
When Kodera turned to look, the tracksuit guy was still repeating his graceful motions. The observers gasped as they heard the bones creak and stir.
"We really should just leave..."
"You guys are the ones to blame. You're the ones who told me how strong that guy is."
Rotate the arms. Bend over. Each movement of Kodera makes the wind tremble. Fixing his eyes on the guy in black, the giant grinned.
"He's the guy who threw 20 of you guys without lifting a finger. I'm tempted to eat him."
"If you're too rough with him, that's exactly what HE'll do..."
"Idiot, that's why I'm here, an ace in the hole. We wouldn't be here if you either saw his face or apologized to him, anyway."
In the grove, a the jet-black clad man was still formulating something. Silently, he thrusts out his palm and gently presses it against the large tree. And then stillness.
Kodera walked up to the movement that seemed like a dance.
"Hey, you."
But the jet-black figure does not even turn around, let alone answer - he just stood there as if he was having a conversation with the big tree.
"I'm talking to y-" Kodera extended his arm as he said this, but his hand, for some reason, was gripping empty air instead of the guy's shoulder. Before Kodera knew it, the jet-black man has shifted his body slightly and was now outside of the giant's reach. When did it even happen? It's absurd. And at this close of a range...
Kodera didn't see any movement at all.
The youngsters who rushed in later after Kodera also had a shocked look on their faces.
"What do you want?" - the voice under the hood was still that of a boy - "I'm in the middle of training."
What exactly could one be training by facing a large tree? With a sense of incomprehension, Kodera came forward.
"You remember the Gladiators, dontcha, young man?" Kodera identified his allegiance.
The boy gave a small nod in response to the giant's question.
Ultimate Fighting Arts is the most popular martial arts tournament in the world. It's a grueling combat sport competition where anything goes, except biting, attacking the marbles, and eye gouging. Gladiators is one of the leading major organizations with a myriad of players. The group has had a lot of exposure in the media, and everyone knows that they're well versed in striking and joint techniques.
But the boy was unphased. Kodera did not like that.
"I hear you beat them out of the ring."
"I was just trying to sober you guys up."
"I see - but don't get me wrong, those guys were rookies who can't even compete in the tournament." Kodera then clenched his fists "I don't want people to underestimate the power of our gang. That's why I'm here to show you..!"
"You don't have to."
"I have to. I don't want to be disgraced when people tell me that our organization is weak." Kodera closed the gap even further. "I'm just trying to say - don't throw our rookies under the bus and get all nice and fuzzy."

But the boy showed no sign of timidity. He exhaled, and then he uttered something completely unexpected - "I don't like losing game fights."

"..Really now?" Kodera became arrogant at the boy's casual remark. The flesh of his shoulders shuddered, making him look like a statue of a Nio. Kodera, furious, stormed over to the boy "This ain't a game... this is serious business", his voice filled with the pride of a fighter. His martial art is the strongest. His pride makes him ignore the boy's words.

"It's a serious fight, we ain't playing around!"

"Don't say you're sorry after this" the boy mumbled, sounding annoyed "I ain't backing down now."

Kodera began to turn his thick neck in front of the fearless boy, muscles jostling and joints making creaking sounds. Emotions had gone beyond anger to murder.

"No gawkers. Besides, I'm wearing a Gladiators sign. Others'll think I was practicing."

Kodera slowly closes the gap between the two. A hot, murderous atmosphere. In the past, some people would have been cowed by that alone. When the boy still did not change his attitude, the giant man moved even closer "My name is Soji Kodera."

For the giant, it was his last chance to surrender. The scene of him straddling his opponent's body until he becomes a bloody mess has been broadcast on television many times. He thought that if the boy heard his name, he'd cry and beg for forgiveness.

But the boy sounded serious and only tilted his head "Never heard of him. Is he strong?"

As those words were spoken, heat surged from Kodera's body. No fighter will go easy on a fighter after being told to do so

"Shouldn't have said that, now I'm gonna...!" Kodera was ready to crush the boy for real, not just to the extent of "eating" him. He'll take the boy's arm and snap it in an instant. That was the plan, at least...

"When did you...!"

It was Kodera who let out that scream. Moreover, with the boy in front of him, he is unable to make the slightest move. The boy quietly announced to the stunned men:

"Move even a little bit..." he looks up at Kodera, who is fainting in agony, and says coldly "And I'll break it."

If you look at it, you'd notice the boy's toe stepping on Kodera's right foot.

The sound of a struggle. An unbelievable force is holding back the giant's rush. I am not talking about breaking a toe. I'm talking about breaking the tarsus. Moreover, the boy's leg is causing Kodera so much pain that he cannot move.

Do you know the kryptonite of the human body, which cannot be overcome by training?

"...Son of a bitch!"

But Kodera's body is no ordinary one. Having experienced countless pains, he overcame the intense pain. The boy should not be able to move now. Kodera saw that and was about to strike his fist...

"C'mon, let's not do this. I hate this kind of hassle" again, the boy is outside the unleashed fist, and he caught Kodera's fist without any difficulty. So close that he could breathe on it.

“You sure ain't no amateur... What the hell is this...!" the boy seems to have put real energy into his legs. Kodera could no longer move an inch. Furthermore, the fist that was caught was also trembling in pain. The boy is clenching Kodera's fist as if he's holding a rock. The young people watching were unsure if they should join in to help.

Then, from somewhere, a dry voice and applause interrupted.

"...I see, I see..."

A small man revealed himself, with a face full of stubble and wearing a worn kimono. Compared to Kodera, who has a large physique, he does not appear to have a good appearance - but the moment he appeared, the backs of the youngsters were soundly stretched. On the contrary, even Kodera swallowed his breath.

"...Oh, h-hey dad!"

"Nicely done, Soji. No one can throw a punch while being stepped on!"

The man smiled gently at the giant who could not move.

"You're a part of the next-generation of aces I myself trained. The Gladiators will be safe for a while."

"But this guy is..!"

"There are innumerable points in the body used in acupuncture, Oriental medicine and as killing points in jujutsu..."

The man then turned his gaze to the jet-black boy, observing every part of his body as if looking at something he was going to buy.

"That's exactly a you're stomping on. It's certainly hard to believe... I've never seen someone do this before. I never thought that a man could actually hold that killing point at the distance you just did."

Instantly, the boy relaxed his legs. Kodera crumbled to the ground.

The man who just appeared walked up to the boy and offered his business card.

"I'm their coach" - hearing Kodera's moaning, Suenaga looked at the boy with a laborious gaze, "I am sorry for the trouble I caused you. My apologies as well."

But the boy had no intention of accepting the card - Kodera almost jerked up again at the irreverence of this attitude.

“Oh, Dad, he's the one who roughed us up at...”

"Soji, it's alright..."

That's enough. When Suenaga withdrew his business card, the giant man was also silenced.

"I'll be back later with a formal apology from the group. Mister..?"

"No thanks."

"..."

"Can I go now?"

"I'd like to talk to you for a minute more, if that's possible" the coach's voice began to show a different emotion than apology, though his apology was low-pitched, meanwhile his gaze probed the boy "What the hell is that martial art of yours, anyway?"

"..."

"No need to hide it. I have a few tricks of my own - but at that close of a range, I could never dodge even a single blow, much less two" Suenaga continued speaking, now somewhat happily.

"There are many people who know the theory of killing points. But only masters can put it into practice without pain to themselves. If you train that hard... I'm sure it would work at our place too."

Kodera and his comrades were taken aback by the unexpected words. Suenaga's smile was becoming more and more cunning. Was he also a man trained in some martial art? There was no gap in his inviting gaze.

"If my eyes are not mistaken, we have a future world champion right in front of us."

Both Kodera and the younger generation had already forgotten how to even breathe. Suenaga saw great qualities in a man he had seen for only a few minutes.

And everyone knows Suenaga's eye for detail. He is a man who can recognize strength.

The boy, however, only glanced at his wristwatch, then backed away curtly.

"A minute has passed. Well, I'm off."

This time Suenaga was taken aback by the boy running away.

"So... Hey - wait, you!"

But the boy's feet do not stop. Not even a trace of regret. That's when the coach tried to rush to catch up.

"Who the hell do you think you are!?" suddenly, Kodera howled. Unexpectedly, the boy stopped walking. Kodera's face was red with resentment.

"You are not an old martial artist and you don't want to use your power to make money. You're just trying to show off... And you're going to make us look like a bunch of fools!"

"..."

"There's no shame in it. I train, I get stronger, I make money. What's wrong with that?!"

The boy slowly turned around in response to Kodera's question.

At that moment, a chill ran down Kodera's and the youngsters' spines.

The boy's eyes peeking through the hood shone like sharp blades.

All the Gladiators reflexively backed away the boy pulled up the hood covering his head.

"I want money, too."

He rolls up the sleeves of his tracksuit. Instantly, the smell of a deadly beast fills the air. The bare arms were like bundles of muscles with countless scars on the skin. Cuts, burns, bruises and small circular scratches...

"Hey, where on earth did you... Those wounds..."

The boy removed the heavy weights on his arms in front of Kodera's trembling eyes. Probably five kilos in each arm. Kodera didn't know it was even possible to move that much. And the same weight on his ankle exposed everything, the boy murmured "...I have more important things to do."

Only Coach Suenaga could bring a big smile to his face when he said:

"...You exceed my expectations, more than I could have ever imagined."

But the boy runs off without looking back.

At the same time, the Gladiators all noticed something and looked behind them. The trunk, where the boy had pressed his palm against earlier, trembles faintly. The

next moment, a large tree emitted a sound like a tidal wave. Every single green leaf on every branch fell to the ground. Kodera is speechless at the sight of the mountain of leaves. Only one person, Suenaga, smiled at the boy's back.

Another one.

In Tokyo in the year 2000 A.D., June had already arrived.

But the humid rainy season sky is nowhere to be found, just a series of hot and humid summer days.

Global warming, which began at the end of the 20th century, has also transformed Japan's four seasons.

Summer is gradually lengthening and the harshness of winter is easing. The climate is close to subtropical.

While the streets of Tokyo have changed, the old houses of the old downtown area are still standing.

The area called Nezu, close to Ueno Park, also retained its old Tokyo appearance.

The jet-black boy ran slowly into that Nezu alley, entering an old but magnificent mansion. The house, no wonder it is said to be in its first hundred years, has a nameplate that reads "Hououji. The garden, lined with lanterns, was covered by a bamboo grove, and a boarded-up detached house was also visible.

"Damn... I'm late by half an hour..." peering at his watch, the boy takes off his tracksuit.

Short wavy hair, golden and with streaks of jet black. It is not dyed, but full of natural beauty. His fearless profile exudes an air of dignity beyond his young years. His eyes, a mixture of sharpness and coolness, have a certain solemnity to them.

His gaze suddenly flashed sharply.

"No way..!"

The bridge of his nose moves. The boy's sense of smell has caught something.

The boy had already jumped over three garden stones.

In a blink of an eye, he takes off his shoes and runs into the main house. And then...

He smiles.

“Lorraine... What are you doing..?"

"Oh, welcome back!"

A beaming smile turned with the sound of a gentle voice, her eyes a clear blue cobalt blue. The luminous glow of her blonde hair reaches all the way to her back.

The girl, wearing an apron over her high school summer uniform, looked up at the boy curiously.

"You were very late this morning. If you don't hurry up, you'll be late for school!"

A girl by the name of Lorraine is cutting a sandwich on the table.

She speaks fluent Japanese, but she's a foreigner who looks out of place in this mansion.

The boy looked at the sandwiches packed in his lunch box and pulled a smile.

"Oh, uh... Didn't I say that I'll make my lunch myself?"

"I waited for you to come home this morning but you didn't, so I went all out and made enough for both of us. Would you taste it for me?"

“Oh, of course... it looks as good as ever.”

With a voice that became awfully sweet, the boy took a bite of the sandwich offered to him. Instantly, a crisp sound echoed in the mouth. What followed was an indescribable taste. Not in a good way. Still, the boy's smile did not falter.

"It's... definitely special. So good that it makes me dizzy! What's in it?"

"It's red bean paste and... pickled radish! Yeah. Oh, and I put mayonnaise in it!"

Finally, the boy's body wobbled. The sandwich may have looked perfect, but his taste buds and stomach resisted it fiercely.

But Lorraine smiles and brings her face close to the boy's.

"I'm sure it's delicious - all your favorite things in it! I'm so proud of it," she said, moving her face closer to him.

"Well, I must say, Lorraine, I'm impressed. You're a genius at cooking."

" Really? Wow, that's great!" the girl with the apron hugged the boy tightly with her thin arms, then, like a puppy, she rubs her nose against the boy's chest. With a sweet fragrance wafting from her hair, Lorraine smiled at the boy. I can't tell you the truth about this smile. But...

"If that's the case, have another one! Here, let me feed you."

With an angelic smile, Lorraine stuffed a second attack into the boy's mouth.

The boy faints in agony, not only his sense of taste but even his thoughts are destroyed and his stomach twists. That's when Lorraine finally noticed a slight modulation in the boy.

“What's wrong, did it not taste good?” This time, abruptly, Lorraine's eyes began to crowd with anxiety.

Blue eyes shine like the surface of the water and ripples spread out.
The boy hurriedly shoved the sandwich down his throat.
"No... Of course not! I-I could eat more!"
"But you look kind of pale. Hey, if it doesn't taste good, just be honest..."
"Trust me!“ he said, ”I'd never lie to you, Lorraine."
Then the blonde girl smiled back.
"I'm so glad! Dai-chan, you always tell me I don't have to make lunch..."
Dai-chan. Only girls referred to him by that.
Daiga Honnouji. He's been living like this for more than 10 years now.
The nickname Dai-chan grows more embarrassing as he grew older, but it's hard to resist.
For Lorraine, he'll always be just a little boy...
"Hey, Dai-chan, please leave this sandwich for Grandpa."
Standing beside Lorraine, who's talking to him calmly, the boy is getting dressed in his high school uniform.
"Of course, Lorraine. Gramps is up already, isn't he?"
Noticing that the clock struck 7:30, the boy took Lorraine's arm and went out into the yard. Pulling Lorraine along with him, the boy shouted to the boarded-up apartments.
"Grandpa, we're off! There's sandwiches left in the kitchen!"
“Oh, be careful!” though Daiga can't see him, his old man's voice still gives him an answer.
"Lorraine's sandwiches are all yours! She said she'd leave some for you" the boy was tongue-tied in his cunning lines.
"You're gonna outlive me anyway... If you're not busy, cook a meal once in a while!"
"Oh, my God, Dai-chan, so you ARE unhappy with my breakfast after all?"
"No, no, of course not... Anyway, let's go. Come on!"
With their footsteps, Lorraine's dainty voice fades into the distance.

A cool breeze ruffled the quiet house, and the bamboo grove rustled. The old dojo is perched amidst the greenery.
The short-cropped gray head and deep breathing certainly belong to an old man in his eighties, but even with his back turned away in his kimono, his shoulders are heaving like a mass, his meaty body full of vigor and fists clenched and deformed.
"He'll always be a kid, that one."
As he sipped his sake, the old man looked up at the blue sky of early summer.
"You can't stay a kid forever, though."
As he closes his eyes to sleep, the old man exhales a breath that reeks of alcohol. Numerous scars run across the old man's rocky face. It looks as if he has been stitched up, but his sleeping face is peaceful. However...
"Go home. I don't know who you are" suddenly the old man called out into the silence.
"I'm just a retired old man. I don't want any trouble."
There was not a soul in the area. No sign of life could be felt. But the old man opens only his right eye and stares through it at the depths of the bamboo grove.

Then, without a footstep, a tall, slender woman appeared - she wears no accessories of any kind and is dressed in a tasteless dark suit, which she wore despite the heat, but even it couldn't hide her elegant limbs. The line from her ample bosom to her nipped-in waist, coupled with her long legs, is ideal. Her wavy black hair was flowing majestically, and intelligence shone in her eyes.

“...Hououji Muyori, correct?”

The woman turned to the edge of the room, kept her smile, and the old man... was, indeed, Hououji Muyori.

“My name is...”

"No need to say your name. Go home." Muyori kept his eyes fixed on the table, and this time he started picking up the pickled radish on his plate with chopsticks.

"I'm an old man in my prime, and I don't ain't got nothing to say to a woman who's got a lot of trouble on her hands."

"Trouble? No, I'm not a troublemaker..."

"Well, things have become very dangerous in this world, haven't they? How can you not be so suspicious when you have something in your pocket?"

Immediately, the woman's spine went into a tailspin. How can someone discern that with one's eyes closed?

Then the old bastard twisted his face in a funny way.

"Bamboo leaves on the ground always make a sound when you step on them. Your footsteps did. But you approached me without making a single footstep. That's dangerous."

And the woman finally realized it.

The old man was still lying down, but he had already staked out a pause. Moreover, it is not the hot, passionate pause that is characteristic of martial artists. It is just popping and randomly deploying silent wards. Unless one has been in a real battle, one would not easily notice this.

Too cunning. The woman understood the old man's competence just by the pause.

"...Are you inviting me to a duel?" Suddenly, the woman's voice was filled with coldness.

The cover was blown. Meanwhile, the old man was still eating the pickled radish.

“Ha-a...!” Exhaling a short breath, the woman plunged her right hand into her chest.

The next moment, it looked like, the black muzzle of a Beretta M92 was thrust against the forehead of the old fool, aiming with unparalleled accuracy. The unannounced, mechanical, robot-like strike instantly took the old man's place. That is...

"Knew it. I'm so pathetic..." exhaling a sigh, Muyo pitied himself "

"I really am past my prime, huh."

The woman was startled and shook her pistol in a blur. The chopsticks that held Beretta down were the chopsticks that had held the pickled radish between them earlier.

Despite being so close, the woman did not even see the movement. Muyori used only chopsticks to seal the slide of the pistol. The trigger did not move even slightly.

"If you're "past your prime", just... what kind of stunts were you pulling off when you were young?" Blood rushed to the woman's face as Muyori finally opened his eyes.

"Dunno, been a long time since then. I've forgotten already."

Realizing her helplessness, Muyori let go of his chopsticks as the woman relaxed her hold on Beretta. The woman, with her gun tucked into her chest, presents her ID card as if in contemplation.

"My name is Reiko Sakimizu. I am a lieutenant in the Metropolitan Police Department's International Crimes Division."

"Oh, my cherry blossom, you have a lot of spunk despite being so young!"

"Don't flatter. You just played with me."

Reiko's moves are also those of someone who knows martial arts. She also has the intelligence to hide her true nature. She's not just a competent investigator - her eyes are sharp enough to show there's more to her.

The old man, perhaps sensing Reiko's true character, gave a light smile.

"The police these days just pull 'em guns out of the blue. Terrifying, if you ask me."

"You're the one who invited me to the duel. What a terrible, carefree person you are."

"I knew what I was getting into. You're the terrible one here!"

Reiko would've chewed his guts out. The old fool, meanwhile, sat cross-legged and as if inviting Reiko to join him.

"Well, sit down. I'll serve you a drink right away."

"You gotta be kidding me! I'm on duty. I don't drink even when I'm NOT on duty, anyway."

Muyori just laughs off Reiko's words with whataboutery.

Still, Reiko, sitting on the porch, took up residence with the old man, who did not seem like an ordinary person.

"I am here to discuss something important. It's about your grandson... Hououji Daiga."

At the mention of that name, old man Muyori tilted his head.

"If you're looking for the Great Fang, he's in high school. Just left, too - maybe you can catch up to him."

"I want to make sure about something first. About his growth."

"Hmm. And here I thought he was gonna get dragged into some mess again."

"What do you mean? He hasn't committed any crimes... has he?"

But the old man does not answer the question.

Muyori just chewed the pickled radish and brought a mouthful of sake to his mouth.

"He's growing up well," he said. "His height is about 185... and he's still growing."

"That's not what I meant."

"So then, you're asking me if he has grown as a man. Then I have some advice for you..."

Muyori suddenly looked at Reiko with a wild-eyed gaze and pointed at Reiko's chest with his chopsticks.

"My grandson is old enough to be a little saccharine in a different way. If he saw you dressed like that, he'd attack you on the spot."

At being told that, Reiko looked down at her white blouse the buttons have been ripped off from top to bottom without her even noticing. The room was open, and the white underwear encasing her ample breasts was fully visible.

“When the hell did that happen!?”

Screaming, Reiko hid it with her jacket and by now found herself at the feet of Muyori. The buttons were neatly arranged on the plate with the pickled radish. Did he tore them off before hoisting the Beretta?

Finally, Reiko realized the unfathomable power of the giggling old man.

"Oh, you..!"

"Told you, Reiko. He ain't no one-trick pony..."
Reiko was interrupted by a new male voice. Afterwards, he steps noiselessly on the bamboo leaves and quietly walks over to the porch. Already realizing his presence as well, Muyori dried his drink in a boring manner.
"Ah, and I wanted to play with her a little bit longer..."
"Now that I am here in Japan, you know exactly what I'm here for."
The man took a bow, ignoring Muyori's words.
“Long time no see, Mr. Muyori... Master Burai... Or should I say... Master Mutsuki.”
Again, the wind whistled.

The boy knew there was a bright red darkness.
There is no escape. Even if you close your eyes, somehow you can still see it.
In a world that seemed to be sprinkled with fresh blood all over, the boy ran and ran.
But no matter how much he runs, it's as if he hasn't moved an inch.
And the voice calling out to him from his back never goes away.
"Great Fang... Great Fang..."
It is a gentle woman's voice.
But the boy never once turned his head to the voice.
For some reason, it seemed like a horrible voice.
Even when he covered his ears, the name stuck in the back of my eardrums.
"Great Fang... Great Fang..."
As usual, he just curled up his body and became still.
Let your fear roam. Forgive yourself.
But today, the voices were closer than usual.
"Daiga-kun... Daiga-kun, of the phoenix temple ....."
"D... Depression..."
“Hey, Big Fang, wake up!”
"Aaahhh!"

The moment a hand was placed on his shoulder, Hououji Daiga awoke from his nightmare. Then he looked around. The familiar classroom and classmates.
Daiga exhaled loudly and ruffled his golden and black tresses.
"...Hey teach, you need something?"
"What the hell, Daiga?! You slept in my class again!"
The English teacher, still in her mid-twenties, tapped Da Fang's shoulder with a textbook.
"You stand out so much, I can easily recognize you even when you're asleep."
The tallest student sitting at the back of the classroom would, indeed, be more visible than the rest. Furthermore, the atmosphere produced by his whole body is unusual. Reminds one of a sharp blade.
No classmate has ever sneered at Da Fang because of his unfathomable atmosphere.
But despite his bad attitude, the homeroom teacher does not remember any act of rebellion from the Big Fang.
That's why the teacher tapped him on the shoulder again, lovingly.

"You don't attend any of the school events, and you're partly homeschooled, too, so at least listen to your classes."
"Aa-ah... Sure, I will."
As Daiga gives a muffled reply, the bell rings.
Friday. As the last class came to an end, Da Fang wiped away a cold sweat.
It's the kind of sweat you don't get from running on a hot day, no matter how much you run.
Once every 10 days. In the worst case, a nightmare once every three days.
And that's as far back as Daiga can remember. He's had them forever.
Like this morning, Daiga feels no fear when surrounded by guys who know what they're doing. But this nightmare is different. He can never get used to it.
"Damn... What's up with these dreams..."
As his classmates were getting ready to leave, Daiga looked out the window for a change.
As the name suggests, Jingu Gakuen High School, the private high school that he attended, is located in the heart of the city, bordering the Jingu Gaien Garden.
This neighborhood, bordered by Shinjuku, Shibuya, and Minato wards, had many green areas and sports facilities. Yet, it is also close to downtown. Jingu Gakuen is truly located in the center of Tokyo. It has a nursery school through college, and Da Fang has attended it from elementary school to high school.
It was not an exceptionally advanced school. Rather, it focused on sports and arts education. Daiga is a second-year regular course student, but Jingu Gakuen is known for its many other courses and is very popular.
One classmate called out to Da Fang, who was looking down on that schoolyard.
"By the way, Daiga, have you thought about joining the soccer team..?"
"Wait a minute, didn't I say no already?"
The classmates blatantly ignored the actual fang that adorned Daiga and was the source of the nickname.
"No, you ARE going to join our soccer team, AND you're going to lead us to the national championship. Oh, and more importantly, I want you to win the national championship and put our faces on TV!"
"You just want to use me. What kind of soccer team relies on just one guy, anyway..."
"I'm inviting you to join us! The whole club is holding hands in prayer, and we even stomped a hundred times to get you in!"
“If you guys wanted to win you shoulda been kicking balls instead of holding hands."
The soccer team member shook his head at Daiga with his head in his hands.
"It's so weird that you're in the regular course in the first place! Why not join the sports course?"
The question was one that was held by the whole school not just this particular classmate.
Da Fang can run 100 meters in 9 seconds and swim the freestyle in less than 50 seconds.
No one, not even the students in the sports course, could match him.
But what is more mysterious is that Da Fang is not serious about any of this, too! He's setting world records with the most casual, devil-may-care look on his face.
Naturally, the teachers encouraged him to transfer to the sports department, and there are countless scouting offers. However, Daiga continued to refuse professional sports,

no matter how much money was offered to him. It's obvious from his physique that he works out, so why?

"I don't like sports" voicing the usual reason, Da Fang did some usual stretching.

Of course, Daiga had his own reason for physical training. He didn't train just to get stronger, either. However, he mentioned the reason only once. That reason was...

"Hey, Big Fang!"

Suddenly called out, Daiga turned his attention to a tree-lined avenue in the outer gardens of the Jingu Shrine. On the roadside, girls in pale pink uniforms can be seen - students in the nursing course of Jingu Gakuen High School. These girls are studying to become nurses through a five-year integrated education program.

Among them, there was only one girl with long blonde hair. There she is. Even though she is far away, she still shines like the sun. Her clear cobalt blue eyes had noticed Daiga looking out from the window.

“Dai-chan, are you done with classes already?” Daiga's smile became even more dazzling, and he waved his right hand in a small gesture. Even with just that cursory response, Lorraine waves back with all her might.

When Lorraine eventually left for another school building, the soccer team member was still there beside Daiga.

"Daiga, I'm done talking about joining the soccer team. Instead, I have an announcement!"

"Eh?"

"I'm appointing Lorraine as the exclusive cheerleader for our soccer team!"

As soon as he said this, the soccer team member pulled out a piece of drawing paper out of nowhere. "Look at this! I stayed up all night thinking of Lorraine's uniform!"

"If you have time to stay awake and think about then, then you got time to play ball- What's with the skirt?! It's too short!"

"Don't be so old-fashioned, Daiga! The shortness is the aspect that brings out the best in her! By the way, I call this outfit "refreshing sexiness"!

Da Fang stood up from his seat in disgust.

"Lorraine would never wear something like that. It's stupid."

"I know, I know. But if you were the one to suggest to her to wear that..."

"Screw you. I can't have Lorraine dressed like that."

"You're putting up a hell of a fight. I didn't think it was as bad as they say... You, and Lorraine, just marry alre-..."

Before he could finish, Da Fang gave the soccer boy a brainwhacker with his fist.

"Me and Lorraine ain't like that."

"B-But she's always been all over you!

"That's because we live together. We go to separate schools!"

"Then hit me harder, Great Fang! Lorraine will nurse me afterwards, ha-ha!"

Letting out a sigh, Daiga stuffed his stuff into the backpack.

"I just live with her." his hands are rougher than usual as he prepares to leave. The soccer team member also backed away when they noticed Da Fang's irritation.

"Oh, I guess you really did get angry. If you're offended, I can..."

"Don't sweat it. Just know - that's all there is to it."

Daiga put his oversized lunch box into the backpack too.
Not a single one of the special sandwiches was left. Rubbing his aching stomach, Daika left the classroom.

"Here you go, Lorraine."
An active-looking girl runs down a tree-lined street in Jingu Gaien, in both hands - ice cream bought from a wagon wheel sale. She offered one on a cone to Lorraine, who was waiting on the bench.
"Thank you, Miki. But please, don't run when holding something - it's dangerous!"
"I'm not clumsy like you, I don't fall down. But are you sure that's the one you wanted?"
"Yup. Kimchi and durian mixed ice cream. Always wanted to try it."
Lorraine's smile sent a shiver down Ogawa Miki's spine.
"You always pick the most incredible combos. God, the smell!"
"But it's delicious. Next week I'll make a mix of natto beans and chocolate. Mmmmmm."
"I sure as hell DON'T look forward to your bizarre combinations every week!"
They're both 17 years old and both are freshmen nursing classmates at Jingu Gakuen High School, though Miki looks like Lorraine's big sister due to being taller.
Miki is the "older sister" archetype. Her boyish hairstyle and interesting eyes are both quite distinguishing, too. The two contrasting best friends were enjoying their after-school time on a bench in the shade of a tree.
"I'm not going to be able to do the training tomorrow," Miki said "Even though it's Saturday."
"Oh, really? Personally, I'm looking forward to it."
Miki frowned at Lorraine, who smiled at her.
"If you're in nursing at another school, the practical training starts in your sophomore year. You don't go to hospitals or nursing homes - oh, and when I say “practical training,” I don't just mean going along with the seniors and helping them."
"I guess so... But tomorrow is nursery school practice, right? I'm not good with kids..."
As Miki's shoulders slumped, Lorraine smiled again.
"I like children. They were very friendly to me during my last internship."
"You're just a teen with the mentality of a child, and your gramps is even more childish!"
Lorraine's lips pouted when she was told that.
"At least Dai-chan ain't a kid."
"Yes he is! More like a baby, even. The other day he got into a fight with a student from another school..."
Lorraine sweltered even more when Miki licked a bite of ice cream.
"The only reason he even got into the fight was because someone was pestering me..."
"But if they find out I hit you, I'll be expelled. Pf-ft. When did that fight even happen?"
"The person I was talking to was a stranger. If it was someone from a school around here, he would have apologized just for showing his face to Dai-chan... You're really a sweet girl."
Miki looked down at Lorraine, who continued frantically, at an angle.
"What the hell? You're the only person Daiga is nice to, no?"
Miki said with a hint of dissatisfaction, fidgeting with Lorraine's name tag.

The name tag on Lorraine's chest bore the family name of Rosenberg.
Lorraine Rosenberg relaxed her expression, looking happy.
"Yep, Dai-chan has always been kind to me for as long as I know him!"
Lorraine, having been born in Switzerland, arrived at the Hōōji household twelve years ago – she was an orphan, and yet, she was brought to Japan.
Young Lorraine felt lonely at the household, but she grew up around Daiga, who was one year older than her and fiercely protective.
Miki, who often visited the Hōōji family, knew this much - but even to her, Daiga was an utterly baffling boy.
"Everyone says Daiga's impossible to understand."
"Yeah… I know…"
"He's got the athletics to run for Olympics, and yet he turns down every recruiter from the pro sports teams."
"W-well... Dai-chan must have his reasons."
"If he had any sense, he'd accept. What a moron. Probably got his skull packed with muscle. I bet he doesn't even know how much the bonus for just signing a contract is!"
"Uh... Miki-chan..."
"You know what Lorraine, you should become a doctor instead of a nurse! Then you can cure whatever ails Daiga! Though whether modern medicine can actually cure him is another matter..."
Suddenly sensing a killing intent, Miki turned around.
There, standing behind her, was Daiga, his brow furrowed - having just finished class.
Daiga snatched the ice cream from Miki's hand.
"You sure got the nerve to call me an 'idiot' and a 'moron' at the top of your lungs, Ogawa. I'm taking this."
"But it's the truth! Give me back my chocolate mint!!"
After gnawing on the corn, the large fang was thoroughly fed up with Miki, who remained unfazed as usual.
Daiga was thoroughly fed up with Miki, who remained, meanwhile remained as brazen as usual – despite being younger than him, she was quite fearless and could voice things no one else dared say. Thanks to her brash and un-feminine personality, Daiga actually got along with her quite well.
"I've got my monthly part-time gig coming up. Gotta get my calories in or I won't be able to work."
Hearing that, a look of worry formed on Lorraine's face.
"Oh, Dai-chan, you've got a part-time job tonight, huh..."
"Eh, I'll be back in the morning. Eat dinner with Gramps, alright?"
"...Okay, just don't get hurt."
At that voice, Daiga found himself momentarily speechless.
Tears were gathering in Lorraine's eyes, beginning to glisten.
Panicking, Daiga forced a calm expression onto his face.

"Kimchi and durian ice cream mix!
I've been wanting to try this for ages!"
Daiga and Miki shuddered at the words of Lorraine, the Taste Destroyer.

"I only got hurt when I was just beginning – lately I've been finishing fights without a even scratch, okay?"
"Yeah, I know." Lorraine nodded reluctantly, her gaze fixed downward.
Miki shot a suspicious look at Daiga, as if reading his expression.
"Hey, you—where'd you get that part-time job? What do you do?"
"None of your concern."
"It IS my concern! You're making my precious Lorraine worry like this! And if you want money, you should just apply to a sports team. What the hell are you doing?"
Daiga, however, had no intention of telling anyone about his part-time job—not what it was, nor why he did it. Even if it was for Lorraine's sake...
He turned his face away from Miki, who stubbornly refused to look away.
"Fine, here's your ice cream. I saved half for you."
"Wh-what the hell? You ate all this?!"
"Shut up, I'll treat you when I get my paycheck." Daiga roughly tousled Miki's hair and then turned to walk away. Without paying notice to Miki's strangely flushed face, he dashed off down the tree-lined path of the Jingu Gakuen.
"See ya! You two get home safe!"
"Yeah, you take care too, Dai-chan!"
Cheered on by Lorraine's words, Daiga sprinted through the dazzling afternoon sunlight.
Lorraine's tear-stained face was still etched in his mind.
Every time her expression darkened, Daiga recalled memories from his childhood.
It was twelve years ago. When she first came to the Hōōji household, Lorraine cried constantly. Her parents had mysteriously disappeared back when she was in Switzerland, but Lorraine still couldn't come to terms with that.
Even young Daiga didn't know what to do about Lorraine's loneliness.
He did have a strong feeling: He didn't want to her to cry. He didn't want her to be sad.
That feeling remains unchanged to this day. That's precisely why Daiga...
"……?"
Suddenly, Daiga stopped in his tracks along the path winding through the grove.
From the shadow of a great tree, a sharp presence revealed itself - at the sight of the familiar face, Daiga's face winced.
"Ah, so you remember me." It was Suenaga... the coach of the Gladiators team.
Suenaga was radiating an unsettling aura while smiling cheerfully.
"I'm surprised—you're still a high school student, huh? And only a sophomore at that… Daiga Hououji."
Where did he find out my name and school? – Daiga thought as he stared intently at Suenaga, who had a faint smile on his face.
"I don't recall anyone stalking me today."
"Oh, I didn't do anything like that! Just one kind person told me, that's all."
Daiga understood now - by all logic, he should have noticed this other presence, but the scent of her hair and her sweet breath... Bad assets for someone trying to hide themselves.
"I want you for my team. I just gotta have you - that's why I came to ask you again."
"I refuse." Daiga declared flatly.

“There’s a lot of people who would gladly take up on that opportunity. Not me, though…”
“But you see, there’s no one exceptional like you out there!” In a low, quiet voice, Kodera Suenaga declared.
“At first, I thought you were part of some traditional martial arts school, but then I realized that wasn’t quite the case. You practice a pretty obscure martial art – I’d wager there are plenty of customers eager to see it in action.”
Daiga saw right through Suenaga's business instincts.
“So you’re gonna market me using that, aren’t you?”
“Ah, but the fighting business isn't that easy — you can't make money just by being novel!” Suenaga relaxed his lips without a hint of remorse.
“When it comes to fighting, you have a certain flair. There are plenty of strong people, but those with flair are rare indeed. That's precisely why I think you're exceptional — you possess both strength and an air of uniqueness.”
“I don't give a shit of what you think of me. Don't ever show your face to me again.”
Daiga tried to walk away, but Suenaga blocked his path.
“You said there was something you wanted more than money. Pray tell, what is it?”
“I just said I had something important to me!”
“Same thing - if we can obtain it, we WILL provide it to you.”
“Aren’t you persistent – I’m not telling you anyway.”
“Fine, then I'll just ask someone else about it.” A wicked gleam flashed in Suenaga's eyes. Daiga tried to decipher what he meant by that.
“...The hell do you mean?”
“You must mean the blond girl. I heard that she lives with you.”
With a triumphant look, Suenaga's expression changed.
“If you won't tell me, I'll just ask her. She must know something...”
In an instant, Daiga grabbed Suenaga’s arm by the wrist, before Suenaga even realized it, Daiga had already spun his body around and slammed it into the ground. Daiga radiated a boiling killing intent from his entire body as he looked down at Suenaga.
“If you try laying a hand on Lorraine then I’ll kill you!”
Daiga let out a beastly roar and thrust his tightly clenched fist at Suenaga, but even after receiving such a strong blow Suenaga's smile did not falter.
“Well, well... I see... Hah... I guess my eyes didn’t deceive me...”
“You...”
“Unbelievable... And this is while you’re still holding back? Just how strong are you when you get serious?”
Though Daiga did find himself in a sudden fit of rage, Suenaga was right – he didn’t hit him with the full force.
Suenaga's defensive skills and damage-absorbing physique are truly remarkable.
“Guess words aren’t enough for you to get it, huh?” Daiga spoke as if he had given up, though his voice still carried a murderous intent.
Standing up, Suenaga realized he had been acknowledged.
“’Tis the way it is. So, you'll join our team, right?”
“Before that, I should show you how I fight for real.”

Daiga’s killing intent vanished, replaced with cold determination - the boy fixed his gaze and took another deep breath.
“It’s not just you here. Whoever's hiding there, come out.”
Daiga's eyes flashed at the presence behind him.
“What the hell are you doing dragging me into this mess? Got a grudge against me or something?”
“Not really.” Just as Daiga thought - woman stepped out from beneath the trees.
The tall figure with swaying black hair fixed her gaze on Daiga and smiled.
“I just wanted to see how serious you really are about it. The name’s Sakimizu Reiko.” The woman introduced herself, squinting her eyes against the sunlight.

Fifty kilometers from the city center, the streets of Zushi were enveloped in the stillness of the late night. The area known as Ikego lies in the mountains away from its central part. Originally, this land was seized by the U.S. military after the Pacific War to serve as an ammunition storage facility. With the increase in U.S. military occupation, it was refashioned as a U.S. military area in the 1990s.
After the Second Korean War, with the withdrawal of U.S. forces stationed in Japan, the Ikego Housing Complex was returned to Japan. A massive apartment complex is now being built on the vast vacant lot. Along the national highway bordering that construction site stood the Irish pub “Highlander.”
Inside the sparsely populated establishment, Suenaga sat at the bar.
“I know it's a bit late to ask now, but... who are you, anyway?”
Suenaga’s alcohol-stenched breath washed over Reiko Sakimizu, sitting next to him.
“That boy... I'm glad you told me where Daiga-kun was, but what do you have to gain from telling it to me?”
“I already told you - I want to see him give it his all.”
Reiko had parked her car outside - she didn't drink any alcohol, just sipped on mineral water.
“Just thought someone like you would be the perfect fit for that kind of test.”
“Ah, you mean the girl who lives with him... I see. Thanks to that knowledge, we'll get to see how he is when he really gets worked up.”
Just what the hell did he get himself into? Suenaga looked around.
Both Reiko and Suenaga were here on Daiga’s instructions.
“Wait here for a while.” Daiga said and disappeared into the back of the pub.
It was already past three in the morning. And just as Suenaga was starting to get impatient...
“It’s time. Take this to the back.”
The pub owner, a white man in his thirties, handed them a laminated pass.
The words ‘Family’ and ‘Access to All Areas’ were printed on it.
The pub owner smiled at Suenaga, who, in turn, looked with suspicion at him. The owner then pointed toward the back entrance of the shop. Reiko paid the bill and walked away from the counter.
A black limousine was waiting for the two of them outside the back entrance.
“Mr. Suenaga and Miss Sakomizu, right?”

A well-built African American man emerged from the driver's seat.
“Get in. Phoenix Boy is already there.”
“Phoenix...?” Suenaga tilted his head in confusion but climbed into the rear seat of the limousine, Reiko followed suit, and the vehicle set off toward the construction site.
“Where the hell are you taking me...?”
Out the windows, Suenaga could see a construction site surrounded by the forests of Ikego. Not a lamppost in sight. But before five minutes had passed, the limousine came to a halt in complete darkness.
Reiko and Suenaga stepped out and strained their eyes into the blackness. And then...
“What is this place...?”
Suenaga was amazed by the concrete structure towering before him - the fish-shaped building stood at least thirty meters tall, most of it was swallowed up by the hills of Ikego and skillfully camouflaged to blend in with the surrounding area.
“This used to be a nuclear warhead storage facility.” Reiko said, while also impressed.
"Remnants of the U.S. military facilities. They sure lasted for a long time."
“But hey, didn’t Japan have a…”
“What, you seriously think the Three Non-Nuclear Principles were upheld?”
At the front of the facility, a thick door stood with security guards on both sides of it.
When the two showed their passes, the guards' expressions turned strangely friendly.
“Alright, move along. It’ll be Phoenix Boy’s turn to fight soon.”
The heavy door opened. A passageway came into view, and beyond it, light.
And as they began walking toward the light, cheers assaulted their eardrums.
“This is..!”
Reiko also examined the area up and down, left and right, and gasped in astonishment - the audience seats stretched out in all directions, packed tightly with spectators.
Men and women, young and old alike, all raised their fists and let out shouts - roughly ten thousand people. An arena on the scale of the Nippon Budokan.
“With this many people, it's amazing the noise and excitement don't leak out.”
Reiko was impressed by the facility, but Suenaga was looking toward the center of the audience - an octagonal structure enclosed by wire mesh stands there, the white mat in the middle of it was already stained with copious amounts of fresh blood.
“This match...”
The two men trading blows inside the mesh were a white man and a black man, both around two meters tall - but there were no gloves on their hands. They were punching each other with their bare fists. Not only did they punch one another, but they also jabbed fingers into the other's eyeballs and kicked in the groin. Even in MMA they didn't go this far. Rules be damned, it was a brutal fight worthy of being called a slaughter.
And the two of them scanned the crowd cheering on that fight with strange looks.
“Come on, finish him off already! I bet my bonus on this guy!”
“If you lose, three hundred thousand yen goes down the drain! Stop messing around!”
The white man, already at a disadvantage in the ring, was knocked down and is being pummeled by the black man. No referee steps in to stop the onslaught, and the battle descends into one-sided slaughter.

As the white man stopped moving, curses rang out and cheers for the black man grew louder.
What a brutal fight. What a brutal crowd.
Who on earth organized this match and drew such a crowd?
It was then that doubts began to swell about who had built this arena in the first place.
“Ladies and gentlemen!” Suddenly, the arena announcer shouts loudly.
“Thank you very much for coming today to Free Bout Tokyo!”
Reiko and the others sat down in the empty seats and finally realized.
“So this is… Free Bout Tokyo...”
The investors are all wealthy individuals with connections to the underworld.
A betting fight created for their enjoyment and pursuit of profit. That is Free Bout.
It is said that massive arenas were constructed in major cities around the world for this event, evading the scrutiny of international investigative agencies. Participants in the tournament include not only martial artists, but also assassins, terrorists, and military veterans.
The winner of the match receives a massive prize - many criminals gather here for it, yet no investigative agency has been able to pinpoint the location of the Free Bout arena.
It was said to have been built in Japan under the utmost secrecy, but even the Metropolitan Police Department still...
“...shouldn't be able to find it.”
Reiko stared at a corner of the audience seats, utterly dumbfounded.
The section protruding from the second floor appeared to be the true VIP seats - the faces of those applauding were all familiar to her.
Deputy leader of the ruling party. President of a major bank. Presidents of conglomerates.
Furthermore, the eighth-generation leader of a large-scale organized crime group based in the Kanto region. Even the U.S. Ambassador to Japan is here. Is that why they were able to build this on a former U.S. military housing site?
The actresses Reiko and Suenaga used to see on TV were playing the part of hostesses.
She felt like an aristocrat in ancient Rome watching a duel between a slave and a wild beast.
“And now, for the main event of the day!”
The stadium announcer further heightened the excitement in the stands.
“Against the strongest champion, bare-handed opponents don’t stand a chance! Therefore, as a special rule, just this once, challengers are permitted to use weapons! Allow us to introduce the challenger team representing the United States of America - the world's strongest counter-terrorism special forces, six former Delta Force members!”
Spectacular fireworks erupted, and distorted guitar riffs swept through the venue.
The ceiling-mounted lights illuminated the octagon, revealing six massive figures.
Projected onto the ceiling's three-dimensional multi-faceted screen were four white men and two black men armed to teeth: swords, axes, scimitars, a whip, electroshock batons, and a steel staff.

The height, weight, and battle record statistics of the six individuals began to flash across the electronic display one after another - all combat veterans who participated in the Iraq War, the Second Korean War, and the Libyan uprising - all of them war criminals and discharged from the military.

Killing civilians, looting, drug trafficking...

The faces captured on camera look like nothing but criminals.

“We Americans are the only ones worthy of being called champions!”

“Champion! I'll kill you and get my ten million dollars!”

Ten million dollars. Enough to drive six people mad.

For those whose only skill is slaughter, this place is perfect for making a fortune - the rumor that terrorists from around the world join the Bout in order to obtain funds for their activities seemed plausible. This is a den of madness where murderers gather, heedless of the danger of being killed themselves.

USA! USA! A tsunami of cheers erupts from the Americans in the audience.

But on the other hand, the voices of those shouting complaints grew louder.

“What the hell is this, six of them arming themselves?!”

“Don't mess with us! Are you trying to kill the champion?!” Even the most unhinged spectators felt sympathy, but drowning out those voices, the arena announcer bellowed:

“Next up, let’s enter our Free Bout Tokyo Openweight Champion makes! Truly the champion among champions! The living, undefeated legend! The Invincible Phoenix Boy! The strongest warrior of Tokyo Free Bout!”

In an instant, all the lights converge on the ring, merging into one. The cheers die down, the six soldiers go into stances, and silence falls upon the colloseum.

Just then, a quiet female voice singing a cappella filles the audience's ears.

Amazing Grace.

As the song played, the center of the ring opened to the left and right, and a human figure surged upward.

The image of a half-naked man rising to his feet with an air of calm was projected onto the three-dimensional screen above the ring. At the same time, cries bordering on screams erupted from the women in the audience. A tall figure stripped of excess flesh. Slender, yet the bulging muscles are mesmerizing - that well-trained physique evoked Michelangelo's statue of David. No, it surpasses even the statue of David, appearing even more robust and resilient.

The sight of blond and black hair mingling together was like a man-eating tiger.

“So… This is his part-time job...”

As Suenaga muttered in a daze, the arena announcement called out the boy's name.

“Hail the champion's name! The champion chosen by the gods, Daiga Hououji!”

Amidst the cheers, Reiko quietly smiled.

As the prolonged cheers finally died down, Suenaga finally came to his senses.

“Even if he is the champion, one against six... It’s just too unfair.”

“Do you think he has any chance of winning?” Reiko asked, and Suenaga let out a low groan.

“Depends on how skilled he is... but once he’s surrounded, it's over. And if that happens...” But before he could finish his sentence, the opening bell rang.
At the same time, six challengers dashed forward swiftly.
Three men surrounded Daiga, while three others stood ready outside the encircling formation. A splendid double encirclement – but Daiga didn’t move a muscle.
“...Seems that’s exactly what just happened.”
Reiko crossed her long legs, and Suenaga's face stiffened.
“What a fool! He’s just asking to be torn to pieces!”
As he observed the encircling net, Suenaga gradually lifted his hips.
“They’re cautious, as expected of former soldiers. Six people attacking together increases the chance of a fatal strike, but it also raises the risk of misfiring and friendly fire. To deliberately use three people for a double encirclement...”
“But Daiga has two hands and two legs too.” Reiko said.
“Two arms and one leg... If he attacks like that, he should be able to hit three people at once, right?”
“You think like an amateur. Even if it worked, if someone diving in from outside the circle attacked his pivot foot, he'd fall, and then die.”
Suenaga stated with conviction: “.....There's no way he can win from that position!”
Then Reiko suppressed a sinister smile.
“From that position... well...”
In that instant, six roars descended upon Daiga.
The first to shatter Daiga's skull was expected to be the two-meter-long iron staff.
The sound of something slicing through the air reached the audience. Yet Daiga calmly took a step forward.
“What the...!”
To anyone watching, the moment Ōga dodged the iron staff was invisible, yet he had slipped into the blind spot of the strike he had launched, already moving to the black man's side.
At that distance, reading blind spots like that—it's beyond human eyesight or reflexes.
The man who just missed tried to toss away the staff.
“Argh!” A sound that could scarcely be called a scream escaped from his throat.
Daiga merely brushed past him with his massive frame, but the man's body spun once in the air and slammed onto the mat.
“No way…” Suenaga rubbed his eyes as if doubting what he'd seen. “He flipped that brute over with just one arm!”
That too was minimal... It seemed like less movement than turning a doorknob.
But Reiko's dynamic visual acuity seemed to surpass Suenaga's.
“Not just one arm... One finger.”
The black man who had been knocked down stared in disbelief, then looked down at his legs, which were now throbbing with pain. Both knees, torn from their sockets, were horribly bent in directions they should never bend. Spitting blood and screaming, the black man writhed on the spot. “What kind of bastard...!”
Even Suenaga, even the spectators who relish the gruesome, cannot contain their astonishment - but the same was true for the challengers who had surrounded him,

veteran warriors accustomed to blood and gunpowder halted in the instant of tragedy. Primordial fear took over them in the presence of Daiga, the Great Fang.

Of course, the delay caused by this was only a few seconds, but it was more than enough time for Daiga to break through the encirclement.

“Don't let him escape!” By the time the challengers came to their senses, Daiga had already broke out of their ranks.

The one with the long sword and scimitar who were held in reserve hurried to pierce the Great Fang.

“Hmph!” Daiga exhaled sharply, then swung his right leg upward at the man with the sword in hand - the challenger tried to parry the whip-like leg with his sword.

But the instant leg and blade collided, it was the blade that snapped and flew apart.

A body that shatters even sword strikes!

But the blade tip of the scimitar, dancing through the air flew with force toward Daiga.

An mistake. Everyone thought so. But when Daiga shifted his body just slightly...

“Gyaaah!” The man wielding the scimitar, who had closed in behind Daiga let out a scream - the blade had plunged deep into his solar plexus.

Suenaga stared in astonishment at the man who had collapsed, blood spilling from his wounds. “You mean he thought through all that?!”

“I won't let you escape!” The man whose sword had been broken lunged at him with bare hands, but Daiga thrust his slightly bent fingers into the opponent's face, his powerful fingertips dug into the white man's eyes.

Blood and bodily fluids overflowed. The eyeballs popped out, prompting vomit from the audience.

Sweat dripped from Suenaga's brow as he watched the boy fight with terrifying intensity.

“Not even ten seconds have passed…” Suenaga's throat made a gulp sound, and within the octagon, a white man wielding an axe let out a scream.

Only three remained. The encirclement had lost its shape.

Even so, the challengers believe there's still a chance to win if they can corner the Great Fang against the wire fence.

“Block his path!”

An axe swings in front of the Great Fang, batons and whips darting in from both sides - but this time too, Daiga doesn't try to escape immediately. He deliberately waits for the encirclement to close... and vanishes.

“Where...!” The challenger panics. He looks up. And gasps in astonishment.

Daiga kicks the man with the axe right in his back, and using his back as a platform, he kicked off the wire mesh and flies all the way to the opposite side.

What even is Daiga? Yes, Daiga was soaring, defying even gravity itself.

One of the Americans swings a whip with thorns at him, but it's not fast enough to catch up. Even the 3D cameras broadcasting the battle couldn't fully capture the movements of the Great Fang.

The boy judged the moment the whip was fully extended and leapt over the user's head.

“Stop it!” Suenaga sensed the power of the single blow and cried out involuntarily.

Daiga unleashed a swift front kick. The whip-wielding man, his face shattered, collapsed against the chain-link fence, he man's body smashing through the chain-link fence, flying out of the ring.
The flesh is crushed to pulp. A power that even steel cages cannot stop!
But the moment Daiga landed, axes and electric batons struck from both sides.
“This time, retreat is the only option!” But contrary to Suenaga's judgment, Daiga stretched out his arm right then and there.
He crouched low, grabbed the challenger with the electric baton by the wrist, and swept the axe-wielding man's leg out from under him.
The startled axe-man had the electric baton shoved straight into his mouth.
As the current surged from tooth to tooth, his eyes rolled back and he passed out.
A cry of disgust rose from the crowd. The last remaining challenger shook his baton.
“Don't get cocky, you yellow-bellied brat!” He snapped the baton in two.
One end of the bent section had a small hole drilled into it, and the moment it snapped, the trigger and grip pop out, transforming into a 9mm caliber automatic pistol.
“That coward...”
“That's not true. We're authorized to carry weapons.” Reiko coldly cut off Suenaga's voice. “Besides, I think Daiga likes this kind of fight too.”
The target is far too close. The black man laughs, certain of his fatal blow.
Then came a barrage of gunfire. Bullets mercilessly tore into Daiga's entire body.
“Ah... Aaah!” For some reason, Suenaga screamed twice.
The first time was because he was certain Daiga was dead.
The second time was because the bullets had passed right through Daiga's body.
“You fool!”
The audience also witnessed the moment Daiga was shot.
But the bullet that pierced Daiga struck the chain-link fence, sending sparks flying.
And there he was, Daiga alone, unscathed, walking toward the black man.
Suenaga half rose from his seat, clenching his fists and shouting.
“Was it just the afterimage that got shot?!”
To everyone's eyes, it had clearly been Daiga himself who had been shot - however, the speed of Daiga's evasive maneuver was so great that it left an afterimage in its wake.
The last challenger, realizing this threw down his empty gun.
“H-help us! We're defeated!”
Ignoring the pleas, the Great Fang gripped the man's wrists with his fists.
He fixed him with a cold stare and began twisting his knuckles like kneading dough.
That motion. The merciless action made Suenaga cry out involuntarily. “Stop... already...!”
Right before his eyes, the black man's arm was twisted in an unnatural direction, and he let out a scream. Moreover, it wasn't just the joint that was broken. The radius itself was fractured. As if a bomb planted in his arm had exploded, flesh and blood spattered everywhere. Next, the blood-stained radius protruded from the laceration.

Looking down at his own bones, the black man collapses.
As the arena falls silent, Daiga slowly thrusts his right fist high into the air.
Without a cheer, the arena announcer calls out the boy's name.
“And the winner is... Daiga Hououji!”
In the hall where not even applause arose. Once more solemn music started playing.
Reiko leaned back in her seat and looked up at Suenaga as he tried to leave.
“You're running away. You're the one who said you wanted to sell him.”
“Indeed... That's why he invited us here. To show how he'd fight if he stepped into the ring.” With a trembling voice, Suenaga continued. "But he's not marketable like that. With his strength, he'd actually kill his opponents. He's certainly powerful... but too powerful for anyone to praise him. And of course, he'd never make it on TV."
“Just tell him to go easy. I've heard there are scripted combat sports too.”
“I have no intention of doing that to him. Even if he went easy, his opponent would get wrecked. If that happens, there's no chance of setting up a match.”
As Suenaga's spine shuddered, Reiko continued further. “There must be other fighters out there. If we show Daiga to some youngsters, I bet one or two of them will say they want to learn that power.”
“Don't even joke about it.” Suenaga swallowed hard and shook his head.
“Traditional martial arts are worth teaching. But his is different. It's the exact opposite of the fundamental principle of martial arts — the idea of subduing without killing. Isn't it fundamentally based on the premise of killing?”
“One-hit kill... Sounds interesting, I guess.”
“You don't get it. To master that power, you have to actually kill someone. I can't do that. As a human being, I can't teach murder.”
Suenaga hunched his back and hurriedly fled from the audience seats.
I saw what I shouldn't have seen - his expression as he left said it all.
But Reiko sighed discontentedly. “You're the one who doesn't get it.”
Looking down at the cheered-on Daiga, Reiko also rose from her seat.
“I want to see him give it his all.”
Leaving those words behind, her cold voice faded into the roar of the crowd.

Daiga Houoji was taking a cold shower in the dressing room.
Despite having fought such a fierce battle, not a single bead of cold sweat glistened on his body. Even so, it was his habit to douse himself with cold water to wipe away the spattered blood.
“What's gotten into you today? Knocking all six of them out like that?”
The voice heard from outside the shower room belonged to a middle-aged man.
Though unseen, it was a voice familiar to Ohgami, of course.
“Must've been a boring match for you promoters. What were the betting odds tonight?”
“Of course, ninety-nine percent of the customers bet on you. No matter who challenges you, they all think you'll win. But even when the odds are stacked against you, there are always those who bet on the long shot.”
The man waiting in the waiting room exuded the scent of a cigar.

“As long as there are guys like that, your matches will still be a gamble. Count me in again next month.”
After stepping out of the shower, Daiga turned back toward the man, completely naked.
The promoter, flanked by four bodyguards, had already presented the check.
“Today's fight money. One million five hundred thousand dollars, right?”
“As usual, half of it goes into my account... The other half, I'll give to you.”
Wiping his body with a towel, Daiga announced.
“That brings the total I've given you over five million dollars. How is the search going?”
“Well... it's not looking good at all.”
Blowing cigar smoke, the man shook his head.
“They say they can't even track his footsteps. We've been throwing money at the local organizations too, but...”
“And still can't find him?”
“But our group's intelligence network isn't useless either. Even though we're a yakuza organization, we operate as a legitimate trading company on the surface. We've sent a considerable number of people to Europe and North and South America. Among them...”
Daiga sighed heavily at the man who had started to speak.
“Keep searching. I want any information. That's why I'm here.”
“I get it. But man, you're walking a pretty dangerous tightrope for that.”
The man said with admiration, smiling at Daiga.
“I don't know who this Lorraine girl is, but she must be important to you...”
“We're done talking. Now get out.”
When Daiga's voice turned sharp, the promoter laughed and stood up.
“Got it. The beauty's been waiting for a while now.”
Opening the door, the promoter left the room.
Then Daiga turned his gaze to the door, left wide open.
Entering from the hallway was a woman who introduced herself as Reiko Sakimizu.
“I've seen enough. More than enough.”

“What about the guy you set me up with? I did what you asked.”
“He went home scared stiff. He was terrified of your power.”
“If I didn’t take him here, he would keep pestering me.”
Daiga made no attempt to cover his naked body as he brought his own drink to his mouth.
“You're convinced now, aren't you? I showed you what I'm really capable of. Don't ever bother me again.”
Reiko smiled slyly and sank back into the sofa.
“You’re serious, huh...”
Reiko crossed her long legs and intertwined her fingers.
“So you're searching for Lorraine's missing parents, huh?”
Daiga stiffened involuntarily at her words.

“Isn't that why you're fighting here? You're funneling the prize money you win to the promoter—meaning the crime syndicate—just to get information. But it doesn't seem to be paying off.”

“How did you...?”

“No wonder you turned down the pro sports offers. If you can earn hundreds of millions a month, you don't need to debut in the mainstream world. But that's not the only reason, is it?”

Reiko said, brushing her long black hair back.

“You're planning to go find Lorraine's parents yourself, aren't you?”
“You...”
“You promised, didn't you? Back when you first met Lorraine.”
Daiga nearly dropped his cup.
But he didn't let his agitation show, looking down at Reiko on the sofa.
“Just how much do you know?”
“Well, I just wonder how far it goes.”
“It was a promise from when we were kids. Lorraine wouldn't remember it either.”
Reiko turned away, deepening Daiga's suspicion.
“First off, if I were going to look for them, I'd have gone already. I've got plenty of money. The only reason I'm searching for Lorraine's parents is because I've got nowhere else to spend all this cash.” Daiga clenched his towel in frustration.
“Now it's my turn. Who the hell did you tell about that just now?”
“Who do you think?”
“Don't mess with me. You know just how powerful I really am.”
When Daiga said that, Reiko suddenly narrowed her eyes. Her sharp gaze scanned Daiga naked body up and down.
“...I’m not sure about that. I haven't seen you give it your all yet.”
This time, it was Daiga's turn for his gaze to sharpen.
“...What are you talking about?”
“Don’t lie. You haven't even used 100% of your power in this arena.”
"I fought to the death against six men blinded by greed. There was no room for cutting corners."
"That's what makes you so terrifying. You're actually cutting corners and still winning."
“Hey, stop with it already...”
Reiko quietly fixed her gaze on Daiga, who had started to speak. Taiga instinctively held his tongue.
Then Reiko declared. “Hououji-style Martial Arts”
Reiko's words were as sharp as a blade. “Did you even use it? It didn't look like it to me.”
Daiga stood there, naked, ready to fight if needed. He only just realized it now. Reiko's movements are those of a fighter. Moreover, unlike with Suenaga, her movements were precise – like of someone who knew how to kill.
“I'll say it again... Who told you about Lorraine?”
“Ah, right... I met up with your grandfather, Muyori-sensei of the Hououji Temple.”
“With gramps? Don't be ridiculous. He wouldn't backstab me like that.”
“True. I heard it from someone else too. Someone who knows you very well.”
Daiga grimaced, his mind racing. The only one who knew the truth about Daiga and Lorraine, who could know Daiga's true power…
There was only one person. That's ridiculous.
“...That guy shouldn't know anything about me.”
“Is that so? He is, after all, your father.”
Father. He was a blood relative whose existence had been half-forgotten.
Even as Daiga pulled distant memories to the surface, no face came to mind.
To Reiko, who claimed to know this father, Daiga asked once more.

“Who the hell are you?”
“I came at your father's request. He wants me to test your strength.”
“What's the point of testing it? After leaving me alone for over a decade, now all of a sudden...”
Reiko silenced Daiga's words with a glance.
“Lorraine is being targeted. The only one who can protect her... is you.”
Daiga's breath caught for a moment.
Reiko's words were genuine.

In a corner of the bar, three glasses clinked lightly.
Taking a sip of red wine that reflected the dimly lit interior, the man smiled contentedly.
“What a pleasant surprise. To be able to drink Hungarian wine right here in Tokyo.”
On the dimly lit table, the middle-aged man glanced sideways at the wine bottle beside him. “And it's a '93 Tokaji Aszu Essencia. I'll savor it with care.”
“This is awfully sweet, I'll pass after just one glass.”
A raspy voice coughed as it set down the glass.
“Is this the kind of sweet liquor Hungarians drink?”
Even at the crude criticism, the man kept smiling as he swayed his cup.
“No, this wine is special, Old Man Vow. We slowly extract the essence from noble rot grapes, then ferment it over an extended period. The sugar content is three times that of ordinary wine... It is the world's oldest ultra-sweet wine.”
“Louis XIV, the King of France, called this wine the king of wines.”
This time, a bewitching woman's voice announced it.
“And a wine fit for a king. This bottle costs two thousand dollars, you know.”
“You're right, Katarina. But the true champion is a rare amber-colored elixir. It was cherished by the Hungarian Emperor as a spiritual tonic... and now, it no longer exists in this world.”
The man spoke, then took another sip of wine. “I wonder if István drank it too...” The man murmured the name of his homeland's hero, the first king, and looked down at his right hand.
The fingertips gripping the wine glass are parched and discolored brown like a mummy. But the arm peeking out from the shirt was full of life, as if from the wrist down it belonged to someone else.
Even so, his withered fingertips moved deftly, fingering the wine glass.
“My right hand is the hand of a king. I too am worthy of drinking the elixir. But it matters not if I cannot obtain it. As long as I can have this, that is enough.”
The man looked back and forth between the two facing each other.
“Katarina, our prey is...”
“Already under the watchful eyes of the undead. Ready at your command, whenever you wish.” In a voice that seemed to bow low, the woman replied.
“Do you intend to make an appearance yourself?”
“No, I have preparations for the ceremony. Leave it to the undead.”
Nodding, the man raised his wine glass once more.

“But the time is right. Let us drink for the noble one before us... to the one with the right hand of a king!”
The woman raised her glass and met the old man's gaze. “Cheers, to the end of our wandering!”
“Very well. Cheers, to the gate of our homeland!”
The wine glasses clink together again, making a pleasant sound.
The three demons, facing the battle ahead, slowly drained their celebratory cups.

【Chapter 2】

Even on a Saturday, family restaurants are deserted at seven in the morning.
After the Bout, Daiga entered a shop along National Route 16 with Reiko.
Daiga sank into the sofa seat and turned his gaze toward the mysterious woman.
“Don't talk nonsense.”
“It's true. Lorraine is being targeted. By an international criminal organization, no less.”
The woman's hand was resting on a police badge.
Detective Inspector Reiko Sakimizu, Investigator, International Crime Division, Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. Even after revealing her true identity, there was something suspicious about Reiko's words and actions.
There was no sign of arresting Daiga, who had participated in an illegal Bout.
“They're no ordinary foes. They've undergone formal military training and are armed with heavy weapons. And they're far more accustomed to killing than you are.”
“Why did Lorraine get targeted by those bastards? The police...”
“Japanese police might not be able to handle them. That's why I came here.”
Reiko rubbed her temples as if deep in thought.
“My mission is to protect Lorraine first and foremost, but the enemy organization has a terrifying trump card. If they play that card, I'll need your strength.”
“So that's why you wanted to test my strength?”
Reiko nodded firmly in response to Daiga's question.
“That's my second mission. If you can wield the Houoji-style martial arts with ease, add it to Lorraine's protection... Those are my orders.”
Hououji-Style Martial Arts. Even Daiga no longer denies knowing them.
Reiko took a thick file out of her bag.
“Your grandfather was Hououji Muyori. He was the successor of the Houou-ryu martial arts, and naturally, you learned those arts from him too...”
“Having my secrets exposed doesn't feel too great, you know.”
Even as Ōga twisted his mouth, Reiko's gaze did not waver.
“The history of the Phoenix-style martial arts goes way back, from what I’ve heard. Some texts even record it as the technique Susanoo used when he slew the Yamata no Orochi. By controlling the energy called the “Blood Soul” that flows through the body, one can purify and ward off evil spirits... The martial art was once under the patronage of the ancient Imperial family.”
“I don't know anything about stuff THAT far back.”

“The power of impurity — protected yet feared by the authorities... forbidden arts... The Hōōji clan survived by concealing their power to protect themselves. Passed down through a single heir, its true nature remained unknown.”
Daiga was thoroughly disgusted by his own dubious background.
In ancient Japan, countless bizarre magical arts ran rampant.
Onmyodo, Sorcery Suppression Arts, Yin-Yang Arts, Black Magic...
Phoenix-Style Martial Arts has a history of battling and overcoming all these sorceries.
Sometimes at the request of public authorities, sometimes to protect their own lives.
It is said to be a martial art that fought in the shadows not recorded in history books, and yet still survives today. Even Daiga himself found it hard to believe. In fact, at first, he thought it must be a made-up story.
However, as he trained, Daiga came to believe in its power with his own body.
The trials were sometimes unimaginably harsh. For example...
“You were abandoned at five or six years old, left alone in the snowy mountains in winter, on a deserted island in the South Seas. Given nothing, you were forced to learn to survive by your own strength.”
How did she know...? Daiga groaned inwardly.
To survive, he learned to kill wild boars and snakes, growing accustomed to blood.
Daiga overcame loneliness and sharpened his wits.
By taking life, he came to understand its weight.
But all martial arts are honed in actual combat.
Understanding this, Daiga threw himself into illegal free fights in search of money and opponents.
Of course, he couldn't use his secret martial arts in front of everyone.
In the end, Daiga fought on without using his martial arts and became the champion.
“Indeed… Protecting Lorraine - that's an order only my old man could give.”
Daiga murmured, thinking of the sealed power.
“There's no one else who knows me, Lorraine, or the Phoenix-Style Martial Arts.”
“German Federal Army, Colonel Walter von Dietrich.”
Reiko spoke the name of Oga's father.
“He's currently on assignment with NATO forces.”
“I didn't know that.”
My memories of my father are faint.
We lived together until I was three. Since we parted ways, I haven't seen him.
Reiko suddenly gazed at the seemingly unmoved Daiga with a gentle look.
“Your blonde hair comes from your father, while your black hair inherits your mother's trait. Your mother was Misuzu Dietrich of Hōōji Temple. She passed away in 2006 at the age of thirty-three... Is that correct?”
“You're right, but I don't have much memory of either of them.”
Daiga tried to recall his mother's face for the first time in years, but he had heard she died of illness when he was just three years old. There was no way he could remember her.
After his mother died, Daiga was immediately sent to live with his grandfather in Japan.
He never liked his father, who never even came to see him since then.

Was he abandoned?
Daiga wondered that many times as a child.
That feeling stayed with him, always somewhere in his heart as he was growing up.
It didn't really matter to him. Even as he thought of all this, he couldn't shake the lingering resentment he had towards his dad. Truth be told, the reason he threw myself into training in the first place was...
"Did Dad find out Lorraine was being targeted while he was on a mission?"
As if to dispel the uneasiness in his heart, Daiga ran his fingers through his hair.
"You said you're on assignment with NATO forces. What exactly is that mission?"
"I'll explain that later too, but the mission is something you could call noble."
Noble? Hearing Reiko's words, Daiga exhaled deeply.
"You won't tell me who the enemy is. You won't tell me why I'm being targeted... Is that what a "noble" person does?"
"Of course, you have the right to know everything. It's just that..."
Reiko hesitated for a moment, choosing her words carefully.
"Explaining everything is your grandfather's job."
"What do you mean?"
"This incident involves both your life and Lorraine's. Rather than me explaining it — someone you only met yesterday — I think it's better if Hououji Muyori-san tells you himself... That's what I think, at least."
Daiga sensed a subtle shift in Reiko's gaze.
"I'll drive you to your place in Nezu. If you want, you can sleep in the car."
"No way. After hearing a story like that, I won't be able to sleep a wink."
Then... Daiga said, as if remembering something.
"It'd be better if Lorraine was here when we talk. She's supposed to be at her internship today."
"I know. She has proper protection too. When the time is right, I'll make sure she gets..."
When Reiko started to speak, Taiga instinctively stiffened.
"Wait a minute. You're sending her to her training?"
"Yes. But she'll have at least ten guards with her."
"Lorraine's being targeted, right? If you're serious about protecting her, wouldn't it be better to keep her indoors?"
Raising his hips, Daiga instantly raced through his thoughts.
"You know Grandpa's power too. He's more reliable than me. So keeping her home and having Grandpa protect her should be the best option, right?"
"You're right. But like I said before, the enemy has a trump card."
"It's powerful, but it's rarely used. We haven't even confirmed any signs of it."
"Does that mean we can relax with the protection?"
"Against an opponent who have discarded their card, we can hold our own just fine. Believe that."
"Even so. Going out of my way to draw the enemy's attention like that... I just can't—"
As he spoke, Daiga's body hair stood on end.
The moment he realized it, he glared down at Reiko with a fierce, piercing gaze.
"You bastards... you used Lorraine as bait."

“No, Daiga! That's not—”
“No... you still haven't figured out where the organization targeting Lorraine is right now. That's why you’re bringing Lorraine out into the open, trying to lure them out...”
Daiga spoke with fury, and Reiko shot him a worried glance.
But Daiga pressed on, thrusting a blade-like voice at Reiko.
“So, which is your goal... protecting Lorraine... or capturing the enemy?”
“...Both. And we have the strength to do both.” Reiko's words, too, were powerful.
“But if you join us, the odds of protecting Lorraine will go way up. So...”
“Words from someone who's let their guard down don't carry much weight.”
Daiga growled lowly.
“In a life-or-death battle, the one who lets his guard down won't win. Once your opponent senses that lapse and seizes the opening, it's already too late to turn things around.”
Daiga slung his backpack over his shoulder and urged Reiko on with a glance.
“Get the car out. I can't trust you guys with Lorraine.”
“Daiga, we...”
“If this was my old man's doing, I'll hate that bastard for the rest of my life.”
Daiga clenched his teeth and bolted from the family restaurant.
At that moment, what flashed through Daiga’s mind was, for some reason, a vivid red nightmare.

“Hey, everyone, over here!”
Lorraine walked with the children by the hand beneath the dappled sunlight.
The weather was fine at Jingu Gakuen on Saturday, but this morning isn't particularly hot. Lorraine was accompanied by children from Jingū Gakuen Nursery School.
“Big sis, let's go to the fountain!”
“Hold my hand!”
The children, having taken a liking to Lorraine were all trying their hardest to get her attention. There are other nursery teachers and seniors, but the number of children gathered around Lorraine is overwhelmingly large. Seeing the children swarming around, even the professional nursery teachers are astonished.
“It's rare to see someone so well-liked. Do you have a little brother or sister?”
“No... but I do have someone like an older brother.”
“Ah, that must be the reason everyone warms up to you quickly. They remembered you well.”
Lorraine's first year in nursing school still consists mostly of regular academic classes - this is only her second time coming for nursery school practicum. Even so, Lorraine possesses a strange, magnetic charm. There were other reasons why so many children clung to her.
“We never forgot about you, sis.”
“I mean, remember when you came over last time? You brought us curry rice, right?”
Lorraine smiled even more when the children spoke.
“Yeah, it's the leftovers from cooking class... You remembered that too?”
“It tasted amazing. It had eel and stuff in it, you know.”

“Oh, right. Melon, ankimo, shirako...” as if remembering, the kids' faces fell.
Honest reaction made even Lorraine tilt her head in surprise.
“Oh dear, perhaps it wasn't quite suitable for children... But I did bring cake today.”
“Yay! I love strawberry cake!”
“Sorry about that. It's not strawberry shortcake, but umeboshi shortcake.”
The children slumped their shoulders even further, and Lorraine too fell deep in thought.
“Why doesn’t anyone like it? Were Dai-chan here, he'd eat the whole thing in one go.”
“I think that person you’re talking about is pretty great.”
Finally, Miki caught up, practically being dragged along by the kids.
“Wait up, Lorraine! I'm totally wiped out!”
Exhausted, Miki was holding the boys by the hands.
“These kids have been running around since morning, fighting, peeing themselves...”
"Miki-chan, you also run around in school hallways, argue with boys, and...”
“Just so you know, I won’t tell anyone!”
Miki screamed loudly, then noticed the stares around her and covered her mouth.
Then she watched Lorraine giggling with narrowed eyes.
“Man... you're the type of person everyone likes, huh?”
“No, people like you too! Remember when you got asked out on a date by a boy from the general studies class the other day?”
“Ah, that guy I turned down? He wasn't my type at all. Whatever.”
“Miki-chan, I think you're pretty popular... Dai-chan even said that you’re pretty cute.”
Hearing those words, Miki suddenly started talking faster.
“Wh-wh-what is that supposed to mean! You guys, don't talk about me behind my back!”
“But Dai-chan said it first. Hey, why are you blushing?”
“I'm not blushing! Just been running around a lot, that's all!”
Miki, flushed crimson up to her neck, roughly ruffled the hair of one of the kids.
“Well, forget about me. YOU need to start dating Daiga properly already. If you dawdle, some other girl will snatch him up.”
“Ah, right. I wonder if Dai-chan will get a girlfriend someday too.”
“Listen... Just because he's been by your side all this time doesn't mean he'll stay with you forever. If you like him, you've got to make sure you hold onto him.” Miki told Lorraine with concern, but she just replied with a smile.
“Catch him... Haha, I guess I can't do that.”
Lorraine gazes up at the sky with her clear blue eyes.
Miki shrugged in exasperation at her carefree gaze.
“You're so easygoing. Well then, he... Ouch!”
“Careful, Miki-chan!”
Suddenly, Miki let out a small cry and fell flat on her butt. The man who bumped into my back was just a passerby.
The other person looked surprised and reached out a hand to Miki.
“Entschuldigen Sie, bitte!”
“Huh?”
Two men in business suits stood before Lorraine and Miki. Both were Caucasian. They held maps of Tokyo in their hands and wore large bags slung over their shoulders.

Miki, flustered and panicked, jumped back from the men who kept trying to speak to her.
“Ah, um, okay, okay... I'm so sorry... um...”
“Hold on, Miki-chan, they’re speaking German.”
Lorraine, who had been listening to the conversation, said from the side.
“They're asking if you're hurt. Are you really okay?”
“Ah, ahaha, I see. It's okay, it's okay. Just translate it that way.”
Lorraine was born in the German-speaking part of Switzerland - even though she only lived there until she was three, conversing in German to her was no problem.
“My friend is fine. Are you all right?”
“Yes, I was distracted too, I'm sorry. But still...”
The men were astonished by Lorraine's fluent speech, then let out sighs of relief.
“I'm glad to meet someone who understands me. Actually, I'd like to go to the National Noh Theatre.”
Lorraine smiled as she looked at the crumpled map.
“It's toward Sendagaya Station. Oh, but...”
“It's okay, Lorraine. I'll look after the kids for you.”
Thinking ahead, Miki gathers the children.
Lorraine clasped her hands together before Miki as if in prayer.
“I'm sorry, Miki-chan. Would you do that for me?”
“It's okay. I'll tell the teacher myself.”
After thanking Miki, Lorraine turned back to the men.
“...Um, did you come to Japan for sightseeing?”
Well, yes. The two blond-haired, blue-eyed men replied, clasping Lorraine's hand.
“We came from Hamburg for import business.”
“But our work ended yesterday. Today we're sightseeing.”
Is that so? Lorraine firmly squeezed the German's hand back.
Looking closely, they were indeed men with the air of corporate executives.
But behind the cheerful handshake, a boy suddenly cried out.
“Something's coming out of that man's ear!”
Lorraine turned around with a start - there was a boy pointing straight at the German.
With a startled expression, the boy repeated.
“Something came out of his ear and moved! I saw it!”
“Wh-what are you saying, Ma-kun.....”
Lorraine couldn't help but look up at the German man's face too.
But the two, unable to understand the boy's words, could only tilt their heads in confusion. Of course, there's nothing wrong with his ears either. Lorraine stared at the boy's face once more.
Not joking, but flustered, Miki covered the child's mouth.
“Hey, Ma-kun. Don't say weird things.”
“But big sis, I saw him! That man is weird!”
“Stop saying dumb stuff… Lorraine, tell those people everything's fine.”
The man with the gentle smile shrugged his shoulders.
“What's the matter with that boy?”
“Maybe he was startled because he saw a foreigner.”

“Oh well, maybe...”
Lorraine hesitated for a moment, then regained her usual smile.
“I'm sorry for startling you, I was surprised too.”
Lorraine let out a sigh of relief and released her handshake.
“Now, the National Noh Theatre is over there. Let me show you the way.”
Thank you. The two Germans tried to follow Lorraine, exchanging glances without letting on, with a different smile than before.

“Can't this car go any faster?!”
Frustrated in the passenger seat, Daiga looked up at the road sign.
It's only five kilometers to Shinjuku, but that short distance is proving difficult to cover.
Reiko's RV had been stuck in traffic for a while now.
Even on a Saturday morning, there's still a lot of traffic in the city center.
“We'll be at Jingū Gakuen soon. Don't worry.”
“Aren’t you a cop? Just turn on your lights and pass them.”
Ignoring Daiga, Reiko looked at the car navigation system - the screen already displayed a map of the Jingu Gakuen.
“Lorraine is safe. We're keeping a close watch on her.”
“Are you sure? She doesn't have her phone during class, so I can't get in touch with her.”
“Then press that button.”
Daiga followed Reiko's instructions - the displayed map zoomed in dramatically, becoming increasingly detailed. It vividly captured even the movements of people passing by on the road at the same time.
“It's relay footage from the reconnaissance satellite. You should be able to spot Lorraine.”
Just as Reiko said, Daiga's eyes locked onto the blonde girl.
Children were running around nearby. That must be Miki.
Daiga finally let out a sigh of relief. The tension finally eased. But...
“Hey, are those guys her bodyguards?”
Lorraine was facing two unfamiliar men.
They were probably white.
They seemed deep in conversation; nothing unusual could be detected in the footage.
But when asked, Reiko glanced at the screen and frowned.
“That can't be... Already making contact...?”
Reiko's voice held an unusual edge, and Daiga's spine froze stiff.
Reiko spoke into the integrated communication port on the steering wheel.
“Ascalon Leader, respond at once.”
No reply. The word LOCKED appeared on the monitor screen.
Reiko stiffened her face and repeated once more.
“Scheduled contact, unlocking. Ascalon Leader, respond.”
Still no response. Daiga glared at the woman sideways.
“What's going on? Can't you get in touch?”
“Lorraine's security detail is deliberately blocking communication channels. They won't even respond to voice unlock requests.”

“In simple words. What's happening?”
Reiko slammed the accelerator and forced her way onto the side road.
“The enemy is already within range to intercept our communications.”
Ignoring a stunned Daiga, Reiko raced through the city center at a speed that defied belief for a police officer.
“It's right there. You'll be there in five minutes.”

Lorraine began walking, the Germans behind her.
Miki also called the children over and headed toward the fountain.
When the distance between them widened to about thirty meters, the Germans exchanged glances again.
Just as the men, timing their move, began to make a suspicious shift...
Suddenly, and yet slowly, Lorraine turned her head behind her.
Caught off guard by the abrupt movement, the Germans halted whatever action they were about to take.
“What's the matter?”
“Did you forget something...?”
Their smiles remain gentle and kind.
Lorraine kept smiling as she hesitantly began. “Um... that's a fake smile, right?”
Lorraine says it as if she'd just discovered that she was being pranked.
The Germans looked down at the girl without panic.
“What are you talking about? We're not...”
“I have a wonderful family and friends. That girl too.”
Lorraine stared at Miki's retreating back.
“Everyone smiles at me naturally... I can tell.”
“.....”
“What are you hiding from me?”
The sound carried on the wind is children's laughter. A Saturday just like any other.
But when the Germans dropped their smiles, the temperature seemed to plummet.
“...So you noticed after all.” One of them said in a muffled voice.
“I thought we’d expose ourselves sooner.”
“I couldn't deceive you... I was warned about that, so I was on guard.”
The German uses unnaturally polite language, yet a sinister gleam appears in his eyes.
But undaunted by that gaze, Lorraine shook her head.
“I noticed from the start. Just somehow.”
“But...”
“Then why did you come this far with us...”
The German's expression twisted in disbelief.
But with her usual smile, Lorraine clasped her fingers together.
“You seemed dangerous. That's why... I didn't want to involve the children. I thought it would be okay once we got this far.”
“But you've got it figured out, haven't you?”
The man said, and Lorraine suddenly closed her eyes.
“I feel like I've felt this way before, long ago.”

The two Germans marveled at her defenselessness, but Lorraine continued speaking.
“I have this incredibly frightening, terrifying memory. I don't know what it is... But you all look so much like that memory. That's why...”
Then Lorraine's expression grew even more troubled.
“But what should I do... I haven't thought about what comes next. I want to run away... Can I run away?”
The Germans exchanged glances, their eyes brimming with delight.
With a twisted expression, he suppressed his emotions and spoke in a groan.
“Impressive... You truly live up to being the chosen one.”
“It's clear you're no ordinary girl... And you cannot escape.”
At the end of the road stood a black sedan parked on the street.
“Our Lord awaits you.”
“Ah, the Lord...”
Indeed. The German nodded emphatically.
Immortal Battalion.
“Our Lord of the Undying, beneath the demonic hordes...”
For some reason, Lorraine's lips began to tremble.
The German man quietly crept closer to the girl who had finally shown fear.

That footage is still being transmitted to Reiko's car.
Seeing Lorraine sandwiched between the two men, Daiga couldn't help but shout.
“Hurry up!”
Daiga, who had started to speak, jolted violently in the passenger seat.
Reiko's car sped down the back streets of Yoyogi at breakneck speed.
With rally driver-like steering skills, Reiko's gaze hardens.
“Shut up or you’ll bite your tongue!”
The vehicle bounced at the top of the hill and drifted through the sharp curve.
Reiko bit her lip and skillfully alternated between the accelerator and brake.
The forest of the shrine had not yet come into view from the train window.

“Please, get in.”
Flanking Lorraine on both sides, the German opened the car door.
Lorraine stopped in her tracks, and the other grabbed her wrist with a hairy arm.
“I won't let you escape. Come on, hurry...”
He was about to pull Lorraine in by force.
“Is this your car?”
The officer who suddenly addressed them in English was from the Traffic Division.
He stepped out of the patrol car with a look of annoyance and pointed at the black car.
“Do you understand English? This is a parking violation. Do you have an international driver's license?”
“I, I didn't know that.”
“My, my license...”
The German switched to English and released Lorraine's wrist.
But the officer's gaze had already noticed the frightened Lorraine.

The marks from the tight grip on her wrist. The German hesitated for some reason to produce his license.
“Why aren't you showing your license? Show me your passport too.”
“You're a student at Jingū Gakuen High School, right? Are you with these people?”
“No, I'm...”
Two more officers got out of the patrol car.
They too seemed to have already read the fear in Lorraine's eyes.
One officer stood slightly apart, his hand resting on the pistol at his waist.
Irritation and impatience began to show on the Germans' faces.
“We can't understand if you don't speak up. Please tell us clearly.”
“We'll move the car immediately. That should be fine, right?”
“So before you leave here, show us your license and passport.”
The uneasy atmosphere drew the attention of passing by.
The police officers also grew suspicious of the German man who was backing away.
“Well, I guess there's no helping it. Hey, call for backup at headquarters. Foreigners...”
The officer who had started to speak let out a muffled scream and vomited blood.
The fist of one of the German men was deeply embedded in his solar plexus.
That single blow pierced the officer's body in an instant, reaching deep into his guts.
“Aaaah!” “Wh-what are you doing?!”
The other panicked officer was being held down by another German.
Before he could resist, he was lifted overhead and hurled into the air with tremendous force.
The officer slammed headfirst into the patrol car's windshield.
As the glass shattered, screams erupted from the surrounding pedestrians.
“Murderer!”
“Run away!”
The German grabbed Lorraine's arm, trying to shove her into the car.
Noticing the movement, the last remaining officer drew his pistol.
“Freeze! Move and I'll shoot!”
But the German ignored him, plunging his hand into his chest.
The officer pulled the trigger, trying to prevent the return fire.
“Aaaaaah!”
The gunshot right before her eyes made Lorraine collapse to the ground.
At that scream, even Miki, far away, turned to look behind her.
What she saw was the moment the German was hit by bullets.
“No way... What the hell... Lorraine!”
The German man, shot at close range, fell backward onto his back beside the passenger car. Fresh blood poured down Lorraine's blonde hair, staining the asphalt a deep, dark crimson.
Another person was shot and slammed against the hood.
“Haah... Haah... Haah...”
The officer, who had apparently never fired his weapon before, wore an expression resembling fear. But his expression twisted further, possessed by fear itself.
Sensing the presence, Lorraine also turned her gaze toward the shot German.

Miki rushed over, her scream frozen in shock.
“Ah... ahh...!”
The German stirred.
Both of them, despite being shot, got up, dripping with blood.
It was not some desperate last stand. A mocking expression lingered on their faces.
And from their ears, from the nose, from the mouth too, something sticky and oozelike stretched out. The ciliated structure was colorless and transparent, appearing crystal clear. It trembled and wriggled, then hurriedly retreated inside the skull.
Then, aiming at the frozen policeman, the German calmly drew his pistol.
“…Damn yellow monkeys.”
The Austrian-made Glock 37 automatic pistol erupted in fire.
Riddled with .357 Magnum rounds, the officer's body was crushed into a mangled mess.
Ignoring the people screaming and scattering in flight, the German grabbed Lorraine by both arms.
“Let's go. That interruption was quite a nuisance.”
“I'd rather not draw any more attention to ourselves.”
Lorraine looked up at the two of them without a sound.
The faces of the Germans were splattered with their own blood.
The wound torn open by the gunshot reveals bone and muscle fibers exposed.
Twitching nerves. The raw stench of intestines spilling from the belly.
If bullets don't work, are they even human? And what flew out of the head...
As if reading Lorraine's thoughts, the Germans chuckled softly.
“Rest assured... we are not the sort to die from lead bullets.”
“A being beyond death... That is why we’re called the Undead.”
But Lorraine slowly shook her head.
“Why did you do such a terrible thing...!”
Lorraine squeezed out her grief as if biting into the men.
But the German who called himself immortal ignored the voice of grief and indignation.
Not only that, but he gripped a pistol in each hand and scanned the surrounding woods.
But the passerby should have fled. There was no one around.
Even so, the undead seemed to sense something, swinging their gun barrels wildly around.
“...Where is it?!”
“I don't know, but this presence is..!”
The gunshot rang out at that very moment.
And twice over. Bullets mercilessly embedded themselves in the undead's forehead.
The bullet pierced his forehead with pinpoint accuracy, exiting through the back of his head.
“Gah..!”
The undead creature, its brains splattered, knelt weakly on the asphalt.
Still conscious, he raises the pistol and roars, trying to fire back at the invisible enemy.
But then, from all directions, a torrent of bullets poured down upon the undead.
“Ah...!”
Lorraine, lying prone on the ground, let out a gasp that wasn't quite a scream.

Bullets poured into the head of the German soldier desperately trying to fight back, one after another.
And not a single one of the dozens of bullets was left behind. You could even hear the sound of them tearing through flesh.
Lorraine's eyes glazed over at the sight of the horribly mutilated corpse.
As the shattered head turned into a mass of flesh, even the undead remained utterly still.
“Dai… chan...”
Seeing her, Miki, who had been trembling just moments ago, shouted.
“Run, Lorraine! Quick!”
The sight of the horribly mangled remains made Lorraine's eyes glaze over.
Just as she tried to lift her head at the sound of that voice, someone took hold of her hand.
“Don't worry, it's all right now.”
Looking up, there he was again—a white man in a suit.
A pistol in his hand, as before. For a moment, everyone thought he was the same German.
But the man who bowed in English smiled gently.
“Rest assured, we are your allies.”
“But... but these people...”
Lorraine, having avoided fainting, pointed at the German.
He might still be alive. Her face was contorted with terror.
As if to confirm those fears, Miki, who had rushed over, let out a scream.
“Aah...!” Miki, having fainted, collapsed into the bushes.
What she saw was the moment the crushed, mangled head began to writhe.
Blood and flesh and skulls flew into the air, and something crawled out of the corpse!
Its form is indistinct. Is it an insect, a mollusk, or perhaps a plant?
None of those, yet resembling all of them, it let out a bizarre, shrill cry.
“Tenacious, aren’t you!”
Protecting Lorraine as she looked away, the man drew another pistol from his chest.
Both Belgian-made FN 57s. Their muzzles spewed fire, striking the monstrous form with deadly accuracy.
Simultaneously, the exploding shell scattered white vapor.
Amid the drifting vapor, the blood-soaked figure struggled desperately.
Enveloped in white smoke reminiscent of dry ice, its movements gradually weakened.
“It should be dead now.”
The man holstered his pistol and gently helped Lorraine to her feet.
“We've been trained to fight the undead. They won't rise again.”
“You are...”
Just as Lorraine began to speak, a dozen or so people came running out from the surrounding woods. White, Black, Asian... Though their races vary, they're all tough men. As they formed a defensive line to protect Lorraine, the man bowed politely.
“We are the ones assigned to your protection.”
“What on earth...”

“I am Major Richard Hadley of the British Army. Pleased to meet you, Lorraine Rosenberg.”
The man with the sharp profile knew the girl's name.

“What a mess...”
In the pitch-black darkness, the woman couldn't help but raise her voice.
But the man who stirred in the world casually waved his withered right hand.
“It cannot be helped. We too were unaware that Richard Hadley had come to Japan. We were careless to make the first move.”
“But with him as our opponent, it's our turn now.”
Slowly, from the side, an old man spoke in a wrinkled voice.

“He's the man who destroyed the hideout we prepared in Sydney. We'll have to give him a taste of his own medicine here.”
“If Vow is going, I'll rest easy.”
The woman smiled and called out the old man's name.
“Now that they've repelled the undead, Hadley must be off guard. We shouldn't waste time in retrieving Lorraine Rosenberg.”
But the middle-aged man halted their conversation with his withered right hand.
“No... You shall come with us, Katarina.”
“What, you think I can’t do it alone?”
“Not really. I trust you. You should be able to defeat Hadley too.”
But then. The man cleared his parched throat and continued.
“Don't forget we're in Tokyo. And we've already made our move on Lorraine. There's every chance the Houoji Temple will start moving.”
Hearing that name, the killing intent within Katarina and Vou intensified.
“...I see. You're right.”
“Then let's go, Katarina. Even if he is a disciple of the Houoji Temple, there's no need for us to hesitate when we join forces. Let us settle this long-standing grudge with our own hands.”
Delighted by that fighting spirit, the man with the withered hand let out a laugh.
“But don't forget. Our goal as the Trinity Squad is Lorraine Rosenberg. We can deal with that Houoji Temple scoundrel anytime.”
At those words, Katarina and Vow silently bowed their heads.
The crimson darkness rumbled low, eagerly awaiting the moment of encounter.

Reiko's car screeched to a halt, its tires squealing loudly.
The massive white building... they pulled up to the main entrance of Jingū Gakuen Medical University Hospital.
Daiga impatiently burst through the door into the chaotic building.
“Where are you, Lorraine!”
His roaring voice made the doctors and police officers passing by turn around.
The stretcher carried the body of the murdered officer.
A familiar voice came running toward Daiga that had made his hair stand on end.
“Dai-chan, over here!”
She was alive... The moment Daiga felt relieved, Lorraine threw herself into his arms.
Long blonde hair swayed, carrying the usual sweet scent but also the smell of blood.
Without embracing Lorraine, Daiga grabbed her slender shoulders.
“Are you hurt? You're not bleeding... from anywhere...”
“Everyone's safe. Miki-chan is unconscious, but the children are all fine...”
Lorraine inquired about the safety of others before looking up at Daiga.
“I'm okay too... though I'm still a little scared...” Indeed, Daiga’s arm trembled like hell.
Trying to suppress it, Daiga clenched his fists tightly.
“...Sorry I couldn't make it in time.”
“No, it's fine. But how did you know I was attacked?”
Daiga calmed down and turned his gaze toward the white man standing by the wall.

He looked mature for someone in his thirties. Along with his sturdy physique, he has intelligent green eyes.
Noticing something was wrong with Daiga, Lorraine clung to the boy's arm.
“What's wrong, Da-chan? That man... he's...”
But Daiga gently pushed Lorraine away and began walking.
Hadley met his gaze and stepped forward himself.
To the taller Hadley, Taiga asked in a low voice.
“...Would you tell me your name?”
“Richard Hadley. British Army, 22nd Special Air Service. Major.”
Hadley's Japanese was more fluent than Oga's English.
“Speaking of SAS, do you understand what my unit is?”
SAS - special forces soldiers possessing the world's finest qualities. Their combat readiness, renowned since World War II, surpasses that of any other nation's special forces. Not only do they excel at creating disruption on the battlefield, but they’re also capable of handling counterterrorism operations and VIP protection.
Yet that’s the world's finest soldier...
“Gah...!”
Daiga grabbed the collar of his shirt. He couldn't move a single step.
The tall Hadley was lifted several inches off the floor.
Fury burned in the eyes of the Great Fang, gripping Hadley.
“You knew Lorraine was being targeted, so why did you let her leave the house?!”
“Stop it, Dai-chan! If it's about me...”
“Wasn't your mission to protect Lorraine?!”
Hadley's men surrounded him, cutting off the killing intent.
Some were already drawing their pistols. Hadley suppressed them and forced his voice out.
".....Indeed, staying under Muyori-san's protection was the best decision. But circumstances did not allow it."
“What do you mean by that?!”
“Muyori-san is an irreplaceable asset to us... you could even call him our last resort. I didn't want to make the mistake of carelessly sending him into battle and suffering an irreversible failure.”
Daiga was not a little surprised. He hadn't realized Hadley held such high regard for his grandfather. But conversely, Daiga's anger only grew stronger.
“Was the order your personal judgment, or my father's orders?”
“Either way... seems he's not pleased.”
“Yeah, you're supposed to be Lorraine's guards. But if you put her in danger, you're no different from the ones who attacked her. So tell me - who came up with this ridiculous plan?”
Daiga stepped forward, challenging Hadley.
“Depending on your answer, I won't forgive you.”
Unbeknownst to him, every ounce of strength had poured into his massive fist.
Reiko, who had gotten out of the car, was looking at him with a worried expression.
Hadley nodded to her, his voice strained with pain.

“The orders came from my superior, Colonel Walter von Dietrich.”
“Why would Dad...”
“But field decisions are left entirely to my discretion. This plan was jointly devised by myself and the colonel.” Hadley continued speaking in a lecturing tone.
“Of course, we were dispatched to Japan to protect Lorraine... but our true mission is to destroy the organization that attacked her. To achieve that, ruthless measures are sometimes necessary.”
“So you really did use Lorraine as bait!”
“True, we couldn't pinpoint the enemy's location. But we know exactly where they'll come... I'm sorry about Lorraine, but this was the surest way.”
Daiga released Hadley's body in a fit of rage. Both Reiko and Hadley possessed an unnatural coldness to them. Is it because of their professions as police officers and soldiers, or is it their duties that compel them?
“...What exactly is your mission?”
Daiga pulled Lorraine, who had been silent all along, closer to him.
“Lorraine was originally a child my father took in. For that father to go to such lengths on a mission...”
“It's okay, Dai-chan. I'm already...”
“No. You’re still scared. Look how much you're still shaking.”
Daiga gripped Lorraine's hand tightly. Seeing that hand, Reiko sighed.
“Daiga, that's not it.”
“What do you...”
“You're the one who's been trembling all this time.”
At her words, Daiga let go of Lorraine's hand. Looking down, Daiga could see his own hands trembling slightly. He clenched his fists to suppress it, but it wouldn't stop.
Daiga was speechless, overcome by a fear that had welled up inside him without his noticing.
“Ahem. I suppose I'll have to explain things bit by bit,” Hadley said, clearing his throat.
“There's a reason we resorted to ruthless measures. Let me show you.”
Hadley started walking ahead, and Reiko followed behind.
Daiga stood frozen in place for a moment, unable to suppress his trembling.
“W-what the hell is with this corpse?”
The doctors waiting in the spacious operating room wore expressions of bewilderment.
The blue sheets must be covering the corpses of those who attacked Lorraine.
Around them, men who appear to be Hadley's subordinates stand in formation.
The doctors' faces wore an eerie, deathly pallor.
“The dean has instructed us not to discuss this... but what on earth are you all...”
“Please forget everything you saw here just now.”
Reiko showed her Metropolitan Police Department ID and silenced the doctors.
“Could you please step outside for a moment? This area is off-limits until further notice.”
“You... you can't just...”
But before the doctor could protest, Reiko quickly whispered in his ear.
“If you get involved in this case, I can't guarantee your safety. Proceed at your own risk.”
“Understood... Do as you please.”

The doctors hurriedly exited the operating room.
After watching them leave, Hadley pointed at the operating table.
“Place the recovered items here.”
Then his subordinates brought in a large water tank.
When it was placed on the table, filled to the brim with water, Daiga tilted his head.
“Hey, it's just water in there.”
“It only looks that way. You'll see soon enough.”
Hadley said, then took a small glass container from his pocket full with bright, red blood. Hadley opened the lid and dripped it onto the water's surface.
Then suddenly, the water's surface began to ripple.
No, the water in the tank itself moved.
“This is..!”
The blood-filled liquid solidified into a gel-like mass, forming shapes that are neither plant nor animal. Vines, tentacles, digestive organs—all tangled together in a messy heap... that's the only way to describe it. With just a few drops of blood, it began thrashing about as if it were about to leap out of the tank.
Then Hadley drew a pistol from his waistband and fired a single shot at that thing.
The shattered bullet emitted a cloud of dry ice-like white smoke, enveloping itself.
With a sharp crack, the contents of the tank froze solid.
“They're vulnerable to cold. We're equipped with freeze-capture bullets.”
“What the hell is this? You're telling me this attacked Lorraine?”
“To be precise, it was parasitizing the one who attacked Lorraine.”
Hadley stroked his chin as he spoke to Daiga, who frowned.
“This is a liquid organism. It infiltrates and parasitizes human brains and somatic cells. While it lacks the ability to take over the mind, it can dramatically enhance the physical capabilities of its host.”
“No way this is real!” Daiga snapped at Hadley, who was wearing a serious expression.
“This isn't some sci-fi movie from fifty years ago. Who would even—”
“But Dai-chan. I really did see it” Lorraine stared at the tank fearfully, her voice strained.
“Getting shot didn't bother them at all. These transparent creatures came out of their ears and mouth... and they were throwing police officers around like toys.”
“They call it a mucus parasite. And the humans it infects are known as the Undead.”
Hadley put away the aquarium, and Daiga calmed his breathing.
Daiga thought “What on earth am I seeing? It's too outlandish a story to swallow right away.”
“Are these guys terrorists? Or some kind of military force? Or could they be aliens?”
“None of those, and yet all of them at the same time,”
Reiko said, leaning against the wall.
“What is certain is that the Undead are active throughout the world, and that they repeatedly kidnap outstanding individuals worthy of parasitism. The number of Undead has kept increasing over the past few decades.”
Hadley paused, then fixed his gaze on Daiga once more.

“Daiga... You saw the tank just now and said it contained only water. Yet it is within that very common sense that our enemy lurks. There are times when we cannot win without resorting to ruthless means.”

Daiga looked up at Hadley with a glare.

Using Lorraine as bait was unforgivable, but Hadley had his own philosophy of combat.

Alongside the soldier's cold-bloodedness, you could feel his sheer determination to confront such abnormal enemies.

“What do these bastards plan to do by increasing their numbers? Take over Earth? And why was Lorraine targeted? Are they...”

Daiga started to speak, then locked eyes with Lorraine.

Lorraine's blue eyes reflected Daiga in them and he promptly shut his mouth.

That, and the image of that colorless, transparent creature Daiga had just seen, flashing through his mind.

“Are they planning to implant that mucus parasite into Lorraine too?”

When he voiced that dreadful thought, Lorraine's lips trembled.

“The demon horde...”

The girl said, gazing up at Daiga.

“That's what they said... those people...”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I... I don't understand... But they said it. That their master is the Demon Horde...”

Then Lorraine turned back to Hadley and the others.

“Please tell me. What is the Demon Horde...? Why... why was I targeted?”

“That is...” Reiko hesitated for a moment.

At that very instant, one of the doors suddenly swung open, and a cart loaded with a medical kit was wheeled in. The nurse who brought it in began preparing for a surgery with a straight face. Reiko scratched her head and approached the nurse.

“Hold on. There's no surgery scheduled here. Haven't you heard?”

“Hey, this area should be off-limits.”

For some reason, the nurse kept her head down and continued preparing.

Reiko stared irritably at the door through which the nurse had entered - it was the same door the doctors had exited through some minutes before.

Reiko stared at the hallway beyond the door... and froze.

“Hey, what's wrong?”

Noticing Reiko's unnatural movement, Daiga also looked toward the door.

Then, without a moment's delay, he pulled Lorraine close to him.

“Dai-chan, what's wrong...?”

“Just... just close your eyes!” The voice Daiga let out was almost an order. “This isn't for you to see!”

Beyond the door, countless white coats lay sprawled on the floor. Wearing them were doctors, charred black. All gasped in the blazing heat, scratching at their throats as they met their end – and yet, no one noticed that such a tragedy was unfolding just one wall away in the hallway.

No screams were heard, no heat was felt, no fire alarms were sounding.

Moreover, the doctors are being burned only in their flesh, without scorching their white coats. The hallway, transformed into hell, remains pristine—its walls and floor untouched.
In every sense, it seemed beyond human capability.
“So you've come here too...!”
Hadley, realizing the tragedy, drew his pistol from his belt.
Reiko and her subordinates all raised their guns at once.
“This is the power of the Undead...”
Suddenly, something overlapped in Daiga's field of vision.
A crimson nightmare overlapped with the scene before his eyes, as if it were a waking dream. Sweat pours out. Daiga’s body won't move. He even feels the urge to run away – “Why... why am I recalling that dream... why is it so...”
But just as Daiga felt genuine fear, the blood-stained door slammed shut on its own.
“Don't try anything funny. Move, and I'll shoot.”
Reiko aimed her Beretta's muzzle at the nurse.
Hadley also aimed his gun at the nurse, who had her back turned to him. Hadley said:
“An impressive display of your skill, but your appearance here is quite reckless. Did you underestimate our freezing bullets?”
But as Hadley finished speaking, Lorraine suddenly trembled slightly. Her slender fingers grasped Daiga's arm. Her eyes were frightened. She sensed something. Then she shouted at the nurse.
“Stop it!”
In that instant, a wave of energy spread out from the nurse's body.
The surrounding air rippled and dispersed in an instant.
Reiko, closest to the source, sensed the danger and quickly threw herself to the floor.
“Everyone, get down!” A shimmering wave of energy raced over Reiko's head.
Daiga dropped to the floor, carrying Lorraine with him.
However, several of Reiko’s subordinates, whose reactions were too slow, got hit by the wave.
“...!” Their eyes widened, their tongues shot out, and they dropped their pistols. Steam began rising from their screaming bodies, blood spewed from their mouths and the copious sweat were evaporating in seconds.
The water inside their bodies instantly boiled and evaporated.
Then, the mummified bodies burst into flames with great force.
Without even time to scream, only the flesh was burned away.
The subordinates met the same fate as the doctors in the corridor.
“I told you not to move!” Reiko's bullet struck the nurse squarely in the forehead.
Hadley and his subordinates continued to fire freeze rounds in rapid succession.
Bullets tore through her body, sending the nurse flying against the wall.
As white cold air rose from her collapsed form, Reiko raised the gun barrel.
“Only someone with this kind of power could... No way...!”
"...Heh... Heh heh..... Heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh!”
Everyone gasped.
The one who laughed was indeed the nurse who had just been shot.

Yet, still enveloped in the freezing cold of the freeze-bullet, the woman rose to her feet.
“Wow, and you called ME reckless, Richard Hadley.”
As the nurse's body shook, the bullets lodged in her fell one by one onto the floor.
The bullet meant to bury the undead effortlessly pushed out of her body.
To the stunned Hadley, the nurse declared in a low voice.
“But it was you lot who underestimated me. Me, I tell you...!”
Daiga stared intently at the nurse who had shed her white coat.
The woman's reddish-brown hair flowed down to her back, gently swaying.
Her dark eyes sparkled with life, and her glossy lips resembled ripe fruit.
She stood clad in a deep crimson suit that seemed out of place amidst the devastation, her slender heels crushing the lingering flames beneath her feet.
Even bullets meant to bury the undead couldn't kill her. If that was the case, what exactly was this woman?
“You...!” As Hadley realized the enemy's true identity, the operating room temperature suddenly shot up.
The boiling water used for cleaning evaporates instantly, shattering the container.
Heat rose from the curtains too, as flames whipped and danced wildly.
“Daiga! Run with Lorraine!” Reiko screamed, and Daiga quickly sat up.
Daiga carried Lorraine as he ran, with Reiko and the others catching up soon.

This is not a battle between equals. It is a struggle of eat or be eaten.
The woman's terrifying smile brought unknown terror to Daiga.

“What the hell is that bitch...”
“Shut up! We’re no match for her!”
There was no time for question. The subordinate at the lead lunged at the door, trying to open the exit, but just as he grasped the metal knob, he let out a bloodcurdling scream.
“Aaaaaah!”
The handle he held had already begun to melt into a gooey mess.
After being knocked down with his hands skinned raw, another man rammed his shoulder into the door - but the flames, as if possessed of a will of their own, burned him too, sealing off every exit.
“Damn it!” Hadley shouted, pointing two pistols at the woman. Crossing his arms as if wielding dual blades, he unleashed a barrage of 5.7mm rounds.
But as the bullets closed in, the woman raised her right hand.
Then the air shimmered with heat.
The hail of bullets exploded one after another, as if striking a wall of scorching heat.
“I am not immortal. You should know that.”
The woman's terrifying smile brought unknown terror to the great fang.
This is not a battle between equals. It is a struggle of eat or be eaten.
A power too immense.
Only Daiga, who had long been immersed in battle, could understand it.
Daiga truly knew the helplessness of those who would be devoured.
“Richard, there’s no way out of this!”
When Reiko screamed, the ceiling sprinklers activated.
But the water meant to extinguish the fire turned to scalding hot water the moment it sprayed out - those who took the full brunt of it screamed in agony as their skin blistered - but that very heat snapped the terrified Daiga back to his senses.
“Lorraine, get down!”
Daiga shielded Lorraine from the boiling water and the inferno with his own body, but his exposed skin was scorched, blood spurting out. No matter how well-trained his body was, Daiga couldn't help but cry out in agony.
“Aaaaaah!”
Even so, Daiga didn't move. He had no intention of retreating even a single step.
He didn't want to leave a single scratch on Lorraine's body.
“Dai-chan, stop! You'll die, so stop it already!” Lorraine cried out, but Daiga still faced the pain.
Through his hazy consciousness, distant memories drifted by.
Daiga recalled the words he'd spoken to Lorraine, who had cried endlessly.
Back then, he told her...
“Dai-chan!”
The pain clung to his entire body, as if testing his resolve.
Daiga accepted the torment solely through his conviction. He endured it relentlessly.
It was as if the Great Fang itself had been forged over the course of a dozen years.
Then, as if she'd made up her mind, the girl suddenly leapt from Daiga's arms.

“Where are you going, Lorraine?!” Daiga shouted, but Lorraine stood facing the flames, her gaze unwavering as she fixed it on the woman.
“Stop it!”
Unconcerned that the flames were spreading to her clothes, the girl cried out.
“Enough... of this!”
Daiga saw her. Lorraine, enveloped in flames and heat, rising to her feet.
Unlike her usual cheerful self, she radiated an authority that could freeze even the boiling air. Both Hadley and Reiko held their breath at the sight of her confronting evil.
And as if to praise that spirit, the woman let out a dry laugh.
“...Impressive.”
Then suddenly, the writhing flames receded toward the wall.
The spurting hot water turned to cold and gradually ceased.
The woman faced Lorraine with a gaze brimming with delight.
“...You truly live up to being the chosen one.”
As the woman smiled, the operating room was struck by a violent vertical shake.
The ceiling buckled, walls and floor cracking with a loud rattle.
Daiga scooped Lorraine up in a sideways leap.
“We're flying!”
Daiiga delivered a front kick aimed at the partially collapsed wall, with all his strength—no, even more than that - beyond the shattered wall, Daiga fled with Lorraine. There lay a spacious entrance hall that doubled as a waiting area.
Fortunately, it's Saturday. There's not a single staff member or patient in sight.
Rolling on the white floor, Daiga looked back over his shoulder.
But Hadley and Reiko were nowhere to be seen, and the operating room had been reduced to a pile of rubble.
“...Everyone!” Daiga shielded Lorraine, who was screaming, behind him.
Amid the thick, billowing soot and dust, a solitary figure stood.
The woman stepped over the cracks and approached Daiga and Lorraine.
“There is no one left who can stand up to me now...”
The woman, a sneer on her face, pointed at the pile of rubble.
“They were only human, after all”.
The sound of alarms is blaring throughout the hospital. But no one is coming to help.
Then Lorraine pressed her lips together and gripped Daiga's clothes.
Tears glistened in her blue eyes. Yet with fierce resolve, she whispered to Daiga.
“.....Run away.....Dai-chan.....”
Lorraine's lips trembled faintly.
Daiga thought to himself – “Why doesn't she scream for help? Why is she trying to let me escape?”
In that instant, a hot wind erupted from within him.
Fear vanished, replaced by fighting spirit surging through his entire body.
Her eyes flickered. Their gazes met once more.
Then Daiga told the girl.
“You're the one who’s running away. Go.”
“Dai-chan...”

Daiga shielded Lorraine with his back as he rose from the rubble.
Without warning, the woman unleashed a killing intent beyond that of any ordinary person. “What, think you some kind of white knight, boy? Guess Hadley wasn’t the only reckless one in your bunch.”
But from Daiga's body, an overwhelming aura erupted.
With a creaking sound, the muscles in his limbs swelled.
Cracking his knuckles, the great beast slowly began rotating his wrist.
“.....Let’s see just how reckless I am, then.”
Daiga drew forth the power flowing within his body and amplified it.
He felt his senses sharpen and his mind calm.
Blood Soul... The power he had grown accustomed to since childhood… Unleashed to its fullest extent.
“I don't know if it will work against such a formidable foe.” Daiga thought “But strangely, the fear I felt just moments ago had vanished.”
Far from it, Daiga was filled with a stirring sense of determination.
“I've lived for this day...”
“The hell you said?”
“I've lived my whole life to beat you!”
A promise made long, long ago. The resolve to protect Lorraine.
That alone forged him. Daiga gritted his teeth to grow stronger - now the time has finally come to test his true power.
Daiga's resolve shakes the very air.
“Daiga...!”
Sensing the sheer force of his spirit, Reiko rose from the rubble.
The smoldering flames on the floor regained their vigor, leaping towards the Great Fang.
As she glared at the bared fangs poised to strike, a scream squeezed from the demoness's throat erupted.
“I'll give you credit for that — you got some courage, but that alone ain’t enough!”
With the woman's shrill laughter, the serpentine flames once more attacked the great fang from all directions. To his neck, the arms, the legs—with merciless speed.
In response, Daiga parried the flames and launched a punch.
“No way, not like that!”
Daiga moves with a speed that surpasses humans, just as he demonstrated in the Bout - but the opponent is not human, and certainly not the blazing inferno itself.
Everything was burned to ashes. It was the moment Reiko despaired.
“You bastard!” The demoness couldn't help but let out a groan.
Daiga's hand blade sliced through the scorching giant serpents one after another.
He swung both arms back and forth, left and right, as if dancing. The fist that cleaved the raging flames bore not even a single burn.
Instead, before anyone knew it, jet-black flashes of light had coiled around Daiga's hands.
“That's...!”
Reiko, realizing what was happening, widened her eyes.

The demoness took a step back and muttered. “Enough with the tricks, you... What's your name?”
“Houoji Daiga.” Daiga glared back at her head-on.
At the sound of that name, even the woman who wielded flames was stunned.
Not only that, but fear itself seeped from her face.
The cruel sorceress took several seconds to suppress her shock.
“So that's how it is. They brought you along, too… In that case, I'll stop holding back.”
Gritting her teeth and clenching her fists, the demoness revealed her fighting spirit.
“My name is Katarina Almeida.” They exchanged names as if paying each other respect.
Simultaneously, Katarina flicked her palm, making the flames on the floor leap up and surround Daiga.
The flames coalesced into a fireball, hurtling towards the Great Fang.
Lorraine let out a cry of alarm. “Daiga!”
But the scream was cut short as a gush of blood spurted from Daiga’s mouth.
The jet-black flashes held in both hands grew brighter, protecting him from the fireballs like a shield.
Katarina grimaced at the swarm of shattering flames.
Reiko squeezed out a voice. “Release the Blood Soul, shield yourself from demons, and nullify their power... That is the shield of Genbu.”
Then Daiga leapt across the crack in the floor at lightning speed.
A speed beyond human vision. This time, a blue flash trails along its path.
Reiko sat up and looked up at Daiga, who had leaped nearly to the ceiling.
“Release the Blood Soul, bringing speed like the wind... Seiryu’s Wings!”
A look of panic flashed across the witch's face. It was a fatal blow. An unavoidable dive.
Katarina unleashed countless flames overhead, determined to stop him.
“You won't dodge this!”
But Daiga enveloped both hands in white light, shattering the fireballs with a flurry of punches. The afterimage of the barrage made it seem as though a dozen arms had sprouted from Daiga.
Furthermore, as he landed, Daiga twisted his body and deflected the flame strike with his legs.
“Ha—!” Daiga exhaled hot breath. At the same moment, Reiko's throat made a gulp sound as she watched.
“Wrapping the Blood Soul around his fist to shatter demons... Byakko’s Fist, Daiga...”
Daiga nodded in agreement, and readied himself once more.
“This is the Houoji-style Martial Arts.” Daiga could feel the Blood Soul surging through his body. Before him - an enemy to defeat, and behind - those he must protect.
Above all, it gave Daiga an immense sense of liberation.
But Katarina too, shaking her reddish-brown hair, roared and raged.
“Don’t rely on your Blood Soul too much, boy!”
The moment Katarina raised her right hand, the temperature shot up. The heated air forms a bullet-like projectile and assaults Daiga in one swift strike.
Was it one hundred celsius? Or maybe two hundred?
Daiga took the full brunt of it, spraying fresh blood everywhere.

The speed is different from the attacks just now – Daiga can't intercept them all with his hand blade now.

Daiga let out a bloodcurdling roar like that of a wounded man-eating tiger. Blows that dodged his hand-sword struck him one after another, beginning to tear away his flesh.

"Pay for your arrogance with your own blood!" In response to Katarina's cry, more fiery strikes erupted and charged towards Daiga. The blades of flame tore through the Great Fang's flesh, eventually sinking deep into its bones.

Seeing this, Reiko gritted her teeth against the pain and readied her Beretta once more, aiming, steadying the muzzle towards Katarina.

"That bitch!"

But the wrist holding the Beretta was suddenly clenched.

".....Don't interfere, Reiko." Hadley groaned as he pushed aside the rubble.

Soot and blood stained his handsome features, and Reiko's face paled involuntarily.

"Richard, you...!"

"We now know of Daiga's true power. We must not intervene."

Hadley stared at the boy as he pushed Reiko's pistol away.

"If he can't defeat that woman, then he's of no use to us!"

The flames wielded by Katarina grew ever more intense, continuing to scorch the Great Fang. Yet facing the wavering heat, Daiga quietly raised its head.

"Then tell my dad..." With a groan, Daiga slammed his clenched fists together in front of his chest. In that instant, the people around them averted their eyes from the blinding flash.

Red lightning burst from his massive fist, his two-toned hair waving like a mane.

"…that THIS is my true power!"

From the boy's battered body, Katarina sensed the spirit of a warrior surging forth – the red lightning emerging from his fists no longer a formless flash.

The flash materialized the instant it was fired, transforming into a massive blade.
“You bastard!” Even Katarina, looking utterly incredulous, leapt back in an instant.
But the blade that Daiga swung down extended further, slicing through Katarina's side.
“You fool!” From the side of the demoness who cried out in dismay, viscous blood spattered - the demonic blood glowing with an iridescent sheen, like machine oil.
Katarina spun around and glared at Daiga with a furious expression.
“You... you bastard...!”
“It's not over yet!”
Daiga swung his crimson blade once more, aiming to deliver the finishing blow to Katarina - but like a gust of wind, the witch's figure vanished without a trace.
Katarina, leaving not even a shadow behind, left only an eerie whisper echo in everyone's ears.
“Don't worry, boy. We are patient. Until we meet again.”
For a moment, roaring laughter echoed through the void, then silence returned.
“Tsk...” Daiga went to his knees. The crimson blade also vanished from his hand.
The damage was indeed severe. Daiga couldn’t even muster the strength to get up.
But Lorraine's slender arms gently supported Daiga's body.
“Dai-chan... thank you...”
Lorraine pressed her tear-stained face against Daiga's back.
“But... I... I can't...” Daiga turned around at Lorraine's sobs.
“You idiot, you're going to get dirty. Look, you're already so...”
Wiping the blood and grime from her cheek, Lorraine finally smiled again.
A smile Daiga hadn't seen in so long. He wanted to keep staring at it forever.
Daiga honestly thought so, then sensed the gaze behind him.
Reiko and Hadley both stared at the boy with awe.
“Release your Blood Soul and slash away the demons... Suzaku Blade. I finally see your true power.”
“That's good enough for you.” Daiga said curtly, looking up at Hadley.
“That woman just now didn't die from your bullets. What the hell was that...”
“A demon.” Hadley stated it in a dry voice.
“They are our true enemy... The Lords of the Undead... ...and the ones who seek Lorraine.” A look of astonishment still clung to his face.
Daiga sensed fear in his look and remembered himself.
He would fight that woman again when the time comes.
Will that crimson nightmare appear once more, then?

“So you've backed down, Katarina?”
Old Man Vow smiled as he looked down upon the clamor below.
“Is her new guard that formidable?”
From a corner of Jingu Medical University, thick black smoke billowed upward.
The fire trucks that rushed to the scene and the patients evacuating have the grounds in complete chaos.
Katarina tsk-ed in frustration and placed her hand on her wounded side.
“The legendary Houoji-style martial arts... I'm surprised there was another practitioner.”

“What?! Hououji-style?!” Even Old Man Vow's body shuddered at the name.
“Surely not as skilled as that rogue from the Temple?”
“My scar says it all.”
Katalina took off her red garments. As she exposed her ample breasts covered only by black underwear, Old Man Vow leaned closer.
“Hoo... this is...” The old man stroked Katarina's fresh, moist skin with his withered fingers. Despite being subjected to such intense gunfire, the bullet holes have regenerated to their original state.
But one thing remained— the scar carved by Daiga’s blade into her side.
“Poor thing...” Vow, fiddled with the scar as saliva dripped from his mouth.
Katarina looked down at the old man, her chest exposed.
“We should retreat. Lord Gentsu should be informed that there’s another practitioner of the Hououji Style.”
“So you're going back to report and rethink your strategy? Hmm, that's a bit dull.”
Old Vow grinned. He wiped the drool from the corners of his mouth and clacked his front teeth.
“When struck once, we strike back twice as hard—that is the Vietnamese way of war. To do otherwise would be to lose face before Lord Gentsu.”
“How responsible of you... Or perhaps you're simply hungry for battle?”
“Both, I suppose. It was only after becoming a demon that I gained the strength to fight under the sun.” As he spoke, Old Man Vow squinted up at the blinding sun.
“It's been fifty years now. Tunnel Rats... That's what they called us in the Vietnam War. We made labyrinthine tunnels through the jungle, ambushing those stupid American soldiers every night. I remember stabbing a white kid fresh out of high school with my knife, his last breath hitting my face.”
“…”
“I was a hero of national liberation. But that life was pure darkness. I lived in a hole, sleeping every night beside my own dung heap. I survived by eating rats or snakes that occasionally wandered into the hole. I spent so long in the darkness that even after the war ended, I couldn't live under the sunlight.” And the old man faced Katarina.
“That very longing for the sun gave me the power to become a demonic force. And wings, too... The legendary Houoji-style martial arts— Now, at last, I wish to fight beneath the sun.”
“Careful now. The chances of us losing us small but, still - don't underestimate them.”
The deeply wrinkled old man let out a dry laugh, his throat tightening.
"In close combat, I'm no less than Lord Gentsu. My dear Harron, you see..."
Old Vow brought his face close to Katarina's scar once more, and with his flabby tongue, he persistently licks the wound. Katarina accepted his caresses with eyes lost in ecstasy. For a while, an insistent, lewd sound echoed from the hospital rooftop.

“Thanks, I'm fine now.” Daiga thanked the paramedic who had treated him and stood up.
Fire trucks and ambulances swarmed around them, their sirens blaring incessantly.

Spectators and reporters alike were pushed back to a distance, yet the chaos persisted.
“This has turned into quite a mess.”
“Yeah. For a fire caused by arson, it's a bit odd, isn't it?” Reiko said it casually, and Daiga grimaced.
“Arson? Hey, you don't mean the police is gonna...”
“You think revealing the truth will make a difference? No one will believe it. It’d just cause panic.” Reiko lowered her voice at that last part, and Daiga could only agree.
The sudden turn of events left Daiga himself feeling utterly bewildered.
“Those bastards are after Lorraine... No wonder they needs the Hououji-style Martial Arts.”
“But you did live up to my expectations.”
Hadley finished giving instructions to his subordinates and then approached Daiga.
“I never thought you could fight against a demon. That was some impressive work.”
“Don't talk to me like I'm some subordinate of yours. I'm not a soldier.”
After exchanging a perfunctory handshake, Daiga let out a sigh through his shoulders.
“That won’t be enough to have then give up, though. They'll come back for Lorraine again.” Daiga said.
“I see. Staying vigilant even right after winning is a good mindset.”
“Enough flattery. This time, YOU are going to listen to me. Go home now. Me and gramps are going to protect Lorraine.” And I'm going to hear everything.” Daiga vented his pent-up frustrations and looked up at Hadley. “Otherwise, I won't be able to die in peace.”
“Do you think you're going to die?”
“All it takes is one wrong move - and the chances of me making one are pretty high.”
Daiga looked back and forth between Hadley and Reiko.
“The enemy knows I'm here now. They won't let their guard down. Knowing the enemy and knowing yourself ensures victory in a hundred battles—that’s true for them, too.”
“Quoting Sun Tzu is truly something else... Looks like he's been drilled in the teachings of Muyori-san right down to his very bones.”
“I told you, no flattery. Besides, if this keeps up, Lorraine will also...”
When he turned around, Lorraine was staring at the boy with her lips tight.
Daiga clasped her hand tightly and pulled Lorraine close.
“...You're the one I worry about the most, aren't you?”
“No, I have, you Dai-chan...”
As she spoke, Lorraine glanced at the stretcher passing by. Looking at the charred arm of the victim, the girl squeezed the Daiga’s hand tightly in return.
“To be honest, I... want to be with Miki-chan and the kids.”
“Lorraine, that's...”
“I mean, I wasn't the only one who got scared. Everyone saw the blood and stuff...”
Lorraine's arm was also wrapped in white bandages.
But in her mind, she was the one who should have been the one wrapping the bandages.
Even if Miki isn't physically injured, Lorraine wanted to support her emotionally.
But Hadley shook his head at Lorraine's plea.

“You should go home now. That's what's best for you.”
“I know. But at least let me see Miki-chan one last time...”
“She must have lost consciousness. Even if you saw her, you wouldn’t be able to talk to her.” Without a hint of sympathy, Hadley stated flatly and looked around.
The hospital grounds were teeming with people, creating the perfect chaos for a surprise attack - watching the commotion, Hadley turned back toward Lorraine once more.
“The longer you stay here, the more danger everyone is in. Because of you.”
Lorraine stiffened at his words, and Daiga remained silent for a moment.
Putting herself before others - it's what Lorraine struggles with most. And the thought of others getting hurt for her sake...
“It's not your fault. So... don't worry about it now.”
“Dai-chan...”
“You understand her pain, don’t you, Daiga?” Indeed, to Daiga Lorraine's anguish was painfully clear. But now, leaving this place was the only option.
The fact that he could do nothing to ease her pain made him feel weak.
The limousine bus carrying Daiga and the others began heading north along Gaien Higashi-dori. Though it was a limousine bus, it wasn't just for sightseeing – in fact, it was a disguised combat vehicle used by Major Hadley's unit of sixteen men for when they’re on the move. The windows were bulletproof, of course, and the vehicle was packed with surveillance and communication equipment.
“How did things come to this...”
Lorraine murmured, looking down at her hands.
“Until yesterday... no, until this morning, it was just another ordinary day...”
The limousine bus was surrounded by police cars with flashing red lights.
Above, a fleet of VTOL aircraft from the Metropolitan Police Department's Air Mobile Unit also provides escort.
Lorraine thought – “I'm caught up in a major incident now. Is there no way to go back to how things were?”
Sitting next to Lorraine, Daiga forced himself to hold back a sigh.
“Don’t worry, the trouble won’t last forever.”
“Yeah... you're right, Dai-chan.”
“I'll end it soon. Don't worry.”
Hearing Daiga's words, Lorraine gave him a small smile.
Just that smile made Daiga feel a little relieved, when...
“This is dangerous... it's dropping dangerously low.”
Reiko clicked her tongue at the scenery outside the window.
To the right of the limousine bus, the shadow of a VTOL aircraft was descending.
At an uncomfortably close distance, Reiko picked up the throat microphone she had removed. “Air Maneuver 03, maintain safe altitude. We're still over urban areas.”
But the aircraft continued to descend, coming dangerously close to colliding with a large vehicle traveling in the opposite lane.
“This is a public road, isn't it? Flying at that altitude...”
Daiga started to speak, but lost his words mid-sentence.
Then everyone realized. They weren't descending. They were falling.

“No way...” Daiga couldn't help but mutter at the horrific scene reflected in the window.
With rotors on both wings, the aircraft spewed black smoke from the rear of the fuselage.
The flames had already consumed the cabin, and even the dead pilot could be seen.
The aircraft that had been flying alongside the limousine bus then crashed head-on into the opposite lane.
“Duck!” Daiga leaned over Lorraine, who was staring blankly.
He himself was stunned. Shock.
Then an explosion. Tremors. The bulletproof glass rattled from the impact.
As the bus swayed left and right, Hadley shouted “Was that an accident? Or an attack?”
“I don’t know! Nothing is showing on the monitors!”
Then, another VTOL aircraft in the sky exploded mid-air and then slammed head-on into a following patrol car.
Explosive flames and black smoke. A police officer engulfed in fire threw himself out of the car.
“Speed up!” Hadley let out a roar that didn't suit his handsome face, and the vehicle swayed violently from side to side.
Lorraine covered her mouth and groaned - the acceleration pinned her to her seat.
“Ugh...!”
“Stay with me!” Daiga desperately supported Lorraine's suffering body.
The arm, battered and bruised from the earlier battle, sent sharp pain shooting through him - but he couldn’t let Lorraine go. To that end, he’ll endure. He'll take the pain.
“An anti-aircraft missile?!”
Reiko screamed, and now something was wrong with the patrol car ahead.
The roof suddenly buckled, and the entire vehicle was about to be crushed.
“Inspector 66, Inspector 66, come in!” Reiko shouted at the escort vehicle, sparks flying.
“What happened?! You abandoned your escort and pulled over to the side…”
“I don't know! We're going down!”
As the anguished voice came through, the patrol car burst into flames.
The burning vehicle spun violently and came to rest on its side, blocking the bus's path.
“Push through! Activate the mine device!” Simultaneously with Hadley's voice, the front of the bus opened, revealing shovel-like equipment.
A device designed to plow through minefields along with the soil collides with a burning patrol car, dragging the wreckage over a hundred meters before finally flinging it aside, but this time, the ceiling of the limousine bus began to creak.
The roof, which should have been reinforced with sturdy armor, began to sink in sharply, forming a distinct shape - and finally, everyone inside the car understood the situation.
“Something's on top of us...” Daiga murmured, still holding Lorraine in his arms.
“I’ve never seen something like this... three claws... two prints...” The shaped looked like giant footprint. Daiga couldn’t comprehend it.
Hadley and the others fixed their gaze on the monitor and launched a counterattack without hesitation. “Second, sixth, and eighth gun emplacements, open fire!”

At the command, a previously concealed black barrel appeared on the bus roof, and the remote-controlled 7.62mm machine gun unleashed a hail of fire at the unseen enemy.
Suddenly, something stirred violently - splattered bodily fluids streamed down the glass window. Hadley, watching the monitor, let out a groan.
“So… She didn’t come alone...”
The enemy outlined its form with its own crimson-black bodily fluid.
Including its elongated neck and tail, its total length easily exceeded ten meters.
Its crocodile-like head is covered in countless horns, and fangs spilling from its mouth are as long as daggers. The claws that grasp the bus are even longer, with triangular spines lining the raised back all the way to the tip of the tail. The finely scaled skin is unmistakably reptilian, but the sight of its massive wings flapping is more like a legendary dragon than a dinosaur.
Daiga was stunned. Their enemies were not only humans?
“Keep firing!” But the monstrous dragon aimed at the machine gun, drenching the gun emplacement with a dark, viscous liquid.
The sticky mucus engulfed the gun emplacement, hissing as it began to melt the steel.
The mucus, having overcome resistance, retained its potency and clung even more fiercely to the ceiling.
“Shit, it's right above us!” Realizing this, Daiga leaps to the back seat while still holding Lorraine. The ceiling above his original seat melted like heated butter, and the invading mucus burned the seat itself.
Those in the front of the car scrambled to flee, but some writhed in agony from the dripping liquid.
“Gaaaah!” The slime melts flesh itself, rampaging as if devouring flesh and bone.
Soon the roof melted away, and violent air currents rushed in through the opening.
Everything flew into the air. The monstrous dragon watched it all from above, looking down through the opening.
“Oh, this is bad!” Daiga swiftly secured Lorraine with a seatbelt. Immediately afterward...
“M-Major! Ahhh!” The viscous fluid soaked into the bus, striking the driver's seat directly.
The driver's seat guard, still gripping the steering wheel, died in a cloud of steam.
And with his dying breath, his foot slammed the bus's accelerator pedal to the floor.
“You've got to be kidding me!” Reiko screamed as the speed shot up suddenly.
The bus, having lost its driver, veered sharply to the right and entered Mejiro Street.
Beneath the Metropolitan Expressway Route 5, traffic remained heavy even on a Saturday afternoon. Fighting in the traffic jam would only lead to more casualties.
“Dai-chan...!” A red bruise had formed on the nape of Lorraine's neck as she clung to him. But if the dragon attacks any longer, it won't just be bruises.
“Protect Lorraine!” Daiga shouted to Reiko, then charged toward the driver's seat without caring about the shaking.
Finally, the dragon's head too passed through the hole in the ceiling.
With its massive jaws, it lunged fiercely, aiming to crush Daiga.

“Daiga, drop!” Hadley drew his dual pistols and fired a rapid burst of bullets.

Undeterred by the tremors, the Major's shot was exquisitely precise, sending bodily fluid flying from near the dragon's eyeball, but the strange dragon merely shook its head, brushing away all the freezing bullets.

“If that's all it takes, then I'm useless!”

Daiga shouted, releasing his blood soul and once again forming the crimson blade – it arced through the air, slicing off the dragon's snout. The monstrous dragon let out a bloodcurdling scream, shaking the bus as it writhed in agony.

Daiga pierced the monster dragon's jaw from below, locking horns with it in a direct grapple.

“Dai-chan!” The moment Lorraine screamed, the bus, now driverless, slid into the median strip. As the bus's right side grazed the wall, the window glass shattered one after another. Sparks spilled into the cabin, scorching Daiga’s back.

“Aaarghh!”
Sparks flew into his eyes. Yet Daiga did not let go of the crimson blade.
The monstrous dragon strained every muscle to close in, determined to stop Daiga from reaching the driver’s seat.
As if diving into that predicament, Reiko also drew her Beretta and ran into the hallway.
“Sakimizu! Where are you going?! Turn back!” Ignoring Hadley's protests, Reiko shot the dragon's eyeball at point-blank range.
Unbothered by the mad dragon's roar, Daiga, drenched in the beast’s blood, roars back.
“You idiot, don't come any closer! Are you trying to get yourself killed?!”
“If you don't stop the bus, then EVERYONE will die!” Reiko pressed even closer to the monster dragon, shoving the muzzle of her gun into its mouth. As she fired the 9mm rounds until they ran out, Daiga groaned even more deeply.
“I'll take the driver's seat! You stay back!”
“But you don't even have a license!”
Struck in its vulnerable throat, even the mighty dragon's strength waned.
Daiga pushed up the monster dragon's neck with all his might.
“Get out! This bus is for humans only!”
The dragon, losing its balance, pulled its neck back out of the rift.
In that instant, Reiko darted into the driver's seat. The driver's half-melted corpse made her hesitate for a moment, but she dragged it out and seized the steering wheel.
The slimy residue dripped from Reiko's hand, burning her palm with a hiss.
“I don't have a large vehicle license either, you know!” Reiko gritted her teeth and slammed on the brakes, but she couldn't stop immediately. The tires screeched, sending sparks flying.
Just before crashing into the line of traffic, Reiko managed to bring the bus to a stop.
“Ah...!” Reiko collapsed from the driver's seat, staring down at her hands stained crimson with blood.
Daiga lifted her body up and shouted into her ear. “Are you okay?! Hold on!”
Then, as if to drown out Daiga's voice, the monstrous dragon resumed its roar.
Aiming for the roar, the survivors fired a volley from their MP7s and SD9 submachine guns, but the monstrous dragon slammed its long tail against the bus and tore the roof apart with its claws.
The collapsing ceiling blocked the way, and bullets ricocheted everywhere.
“Cease fire! Get off the bus first!”
As if mocking Hadley's voice, the monster let out a growl.
Then, flapping its wings, the monstrous dragon soared away from the vehicle with ease.
“Like I'd let you get away!”
Daiga, still gripping the crimson blade, tried to crawl up the ceiling.
But Lorraine's anguished voice stopped him in his tracks.
“Wait, Dai-chan!”
“What is it?!”
He turned to see Lorraine, who had risen from her seat, rushing toward Reiko.
“Everyone needs treatment first! We have to get them to the hospital immediately...”
Daiga was told in a pained voice and turned his gaze toward Reiko.

He had thought her a cold woman, but she showed him her will to fight with her life on the line.
And before he knew it, Hadley and the others had formed a circle around Lorraine.
You fought for Lorraine... Thinking that,Daiga wanted to respond.
“We’ve let them slip away again...!” Daiga looked up bitterly at the sky, dispelling the crimson blade in his hand like scattered clouds.
The monstrous dragon had already vanished into the blue sky, leaving not even a shadow behind.
The flashing lights of the police car that had rushed to the scene hurt Daiga’s eyes.
He thought to himself – “Just what kind of insane conflict have I gotten myself caught up in? Although… it seems like there was no way to escape it.”

Just before five in the evening. The Hungarian restaurant wasn't even open yet.
However, in the dimly lit interior, a single man sat at a table.
He drank his glass and turned his gaze toward the multifaceted screen suspended from the ceiling.
“According to the Metropolitan Police Department's announcement as of 4:00 PM, the fire at Jingu Gakuen Medical University Hospital has resulted in eight fatalities and four missing persons. Due to this incident, the area surrounding Jingu Gaien...”
“Now, the names of those who perished. Professor of Jingu Gakuen Medical University...”
“Mr. Ohtani at the scene, any developments regarding the bus accident at Edogawabashi?”
The multiple screens all relayed the afternoon's tragedy. The man watching them slowly turned his head behind him.
“Another practitioner of the Hououji Style...?”
“Indeed, Master Gentsu.”
Kneeling in the dim light, Katarina nodded to the man approaching the table.
“The crimson blade that wounded my flesh... I see its power surpasses what I'd heard.”
“My Harron suffered the same fate.” Old Vow sat cross-legged on the floor, swallowing his agony. A slash ran diagonally across his face, blood dripping from beneath his jaw. “I did not mean to underestimate him... but I am ashamed. I shall accept any punishment you see fit.”
“What is that man's name?”
“Hououji Daiga.” When Katarina stated the name she had received, the man frowned.
Simultaneously, the glass in his hand shattered with a loud crack.
As her glimmering blood flowed, Katarina too showed her shock.
“You mean... Lord Gentsu...!”
“I once fought with all my strength to kill a single Japanese man. Never underestimate a single man. To kill that one man, I lost both my subordinates.”
“Are you referring to the incident in Berlin fourteen years ago?”
“Yes, old man Vow. And having lost my men, I let the other Japanese man I was ordered to kill slip away. That Japanese man... was three years old at the time.”
The man called Gentsu clenched his wounded hand.

“Interesting. I never imagined the chance for revenge would come around in this manner.” Gentsu let out a dry laugh and rose calmly. “If he has grown, we must be even more vigilant. And with Hououji Temple's rogue also present...”
He paused for a moment, then pinched his sharp chin.
“We have no choice but to challenge them as one united force.”
“But Lord Gentsu, the ritual preparations...”
“Now that I have heard the name of Hououji... My blood boils beyond restraint.”
Gentsu erupted with a blade-like killing intent radiating from his entire body.
His eyes held only malevolence. Nothing else.

【Chapter 3】

“Does it still hurt, Ms. Sakimizu?” Lorraine asked as she wrapped Reiko's arm in bandages.
Deep into the night at the Hououji residence, the rustling of the bamboo grove sounded soothingly. Sitting on the veranda of the dojo, Reiko rubbed her treated arm.
“No, it's fine. You're quite skilled for a student. You're very experienced.”
Hearing this, Lorraine looked down, a pleased expression on her face.
Reiko took the girl's hand and finally let a soft smile touch her lips.
“Just call me Reiko. Even if you don't like it, we'll be spending a lot of time together. Nice to meet you.”
Likewise. Lorraine nodded, then shifted her gaze to the wooden floor of the dojo.
“Is Dai-chan okay now?”
Daiga was pouring Blood Souls into Major Hadley's arm.
“It's no big deal. A night's sleep and I'll be fine.”
In fact, the wounds Daiga sustained were healing at an astonishing rate, and the wounds on Hadley that Daiga touched were closing before their eyes.
“I heard Phoenix Style Martial Arts revives the body using Blood souls...”
"That's the first technique in basic training. By circulating the Blood Soul, you heal your own body; by releasing it, you revive another's... It's the technique of Life-giving."
Ōga rotated his wrist, manipulating the Blood Soul.
“Its counterpart is the Killing Technique. Using the Blood Soul, you turn your body into a blade and armor. Only after mastering both the Killing and Life-giving techniques is the basic training complete.”
"So that's what they mean by ‘Mastery of Life and Death’. But in jujutsu, the killing technique—even though it says ‘kill’—is just striking technique."
“In your case, though, you really do kill.” At Reiko's words, Daiga lowered his eyes.
“Grandpa demanded I stand on the battlefield every day, no matter how badly wounded I was. No rest like an athlete. Because you never know how long the fighting will last.” Daiga addressed his grandfather seated on the veranda.
Standing apart from the others, the Hououji rogue gazed at the moonlight and quietly tipped his cup of sake. “Shut up, Daiga. I'm in a bad mood today.”

“That must be my fault, Master Rogue.” Hadley, his wounds healed, raised a glass of chilled Darjeeling to his lips. “I opposed him taking charge of Lorraine's protection.”
“.....”
“And that led to today's failure. Had Daiga not arrived in time, unaware that the demon horde had reached Japan, Lorraine would have been taken... I apologize.”
Hadley straightened his knees and bowed his head.
That posture. That attitude toward the rogue.
It was precisely what a disciple would adopt toward his master.
Meanwhile, the rogue turned to Hadley with a voice thicker than usual from drinking.
“There's no such thing as a fight without miscalculations, Hadley.”
He drained his cup in one gulp and continued.
“Especially against an opponent like that - things never go exactly as planned. Besides, you chewed through your own blunder with your own strength. Isn't that enough?”
“But Daiga won, and I did nothing...”
“The one I'm dissatisfied with is myself.”
The rogue uncrossed his legs and slowly turned his face toward Daiga.
Then, he heaved a sigh, his broad shoulders rising and falling.
“If only I had more children...” A resigned smile. And it was filled with sorrow.
It was the first time Daiga had ever seen his grandfather look like that.
“Tell me, Grandpa.” Daiga straightened his posture and knelt beside his grandfather.
“How can we fight without knowing the truth? Lorraine's worried too.”
"No, Grandpa. I'm not scared. You're here with me..."
Lorraine approached recklessly, looking up at his scarred face.
“But I want to know the truth too. Then maybe I could do something. Just being protected... not being able to do anything... I don't want that.”
Daiga was slightly surprised by Lorraine's words.
She may seem gentle, but I know she's strong at heart - but to accept her predicament this fully...
Perhaps sensing the girl's resolve, Muyori stroked her blonde hair with his thick hand.
“If you get any deeper into this, you won't be able to go back to your old life.”
“If that's my fate, I'll accept it, Grandpa.”
The old man smiled contentedly, and Hadley straightened her posture.
“Then let us begin with our mission.”
Fixing his gaze on Daiga and Lorraine, the Major began to choose his words carefully.
“Our unit has no official designation. It is simply known as the Siegengang, taken from the location of our headquarters. We operate directly under the NATO Supreme Council, though our very existence remains classified.”
“What exactly is the mission of this… Siegengang unit?” Lorraine asked, and the Major took a sip of Darjeeling tea.
“Hunting Nazis.” Daiga frowned at the unexpected words, but the Major continued.
“The Nazis were a political party that ruled Germany about eighty years ago. With Adolf Hitler as Führer, they controlled most of Europe during World War II, but ultimately they were defeated.”

Daiga looked at Hadley, who spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, with a suspicious gaze.
“Well, even I know about Anne Frank's diary and the Auschwitz concentration camp...”
But this was 2020. Over seventy years have passed since Hitler died.
That's ancient history now—recent textbooks barely give it a few lines.
Daiga felt utterly detached from the reality, but Hadley's expression grew sterner.
“You're right, many Jews were massacred back then. The Nazis carried out the Final Solution to exterminate those they considered enemies—Poles, Gypsies, homosexuals, and others. And after the war, those involved in such massacres were tried at the war tribunals.”
But, the Major cut himself off.
“It's also true that war criminals, fearing retribution, fled to hide across the world. One of the most famous was former Major Adolf Eichmann. Despite being at the heart of the Jewish genocide, he lay hidden in Argentina for fifteen years until the Israeli intelligence agency, the Mossad, captured him in 1960.”
“So is the Ziegen Agency’s mission also to track down escaped war criminals?”
“But aren't they all dead by now?” When Lorraine asked, this time Reiko shook her head.
“Originally, our mission was to pursue war criminals, but Nazism still thrives in the world today” Reiko interlaced her slender fingers as she chose her words carefully.
“Japan aside, countless organizations calling themselves neo-Nazis exist in Europe and America. Their members are young people like you who know nothing of World War II. European groups target foreign workers, while American ones align with anti-Black movements.”
“Moreover, their scale expands yearly, becoming highly militarized. The Ziegen Agency has persisted to this day as an anti-neo-Nazi unit. Its members are selected from NATO nations.” Hadley's words made Daiga recall his father.
“So when did my dad get involved with the Siegengang?”
Hadley told him: “1991.”
“Your father, Colonel Dietrich, was just twenty-two. Coincidentally, it was the year East and West Germany unified... He was assigned to investigate a powerful neo-Nazi organization.” The Major pulled the handheld computer beside him closer as he spoke. Then, a three-dimensional display began showing a gathering of people in military uniforms. All of them were stretching their arms straight toward a massive hooked cross.
“The Armed Immortal Guard... An ideological group rigidly fixated on extreme electicism. Rumor had it their membership numbered in the tens of thousands and they possessed abundant funding.”
Immortals... Hearing that name, Daiga's hips jerked upward.
“Wait a minute, these guys here...”
“Yes, they're possessed by the same liquid parasites that attacked Lorraine.”
Daiga recalled the shapeless creature thrashing about in the tank.
Lorraine fell silent, and the Major continued.
“Immortal bodies, extraordinary physical abilities. The existence of immortals had been confirmed since the 1950s. But the shock was so immense that governments

worldwide suppressed the information and entrusted the investigation to the Ziegen Agency."

"Meanwhile, the immortals kept abducting people." Reiko spoke calmly.

"If they were talented individuals, race or nationality didn't matter. From politicians to ordinary housewives."

"Who exactly was leading this organization? Your father began investigating that."

Hadley continued, bit by bit.

"Eventually, your father pinpointed the organization's base in South America. Leading the Ziegen Agency, he ventured deep into the Amazon jungle and launched a surprise attack... obtaining a great deal of information. That was in 1993."

"And this man was the catalyst." Hadley tapped the keys, pulling up the image of the old man.

Lying in bed, the old man moved his trembling lips, as if frightened.

"I landed on that land... the promised land His Excellency spoke of... They were there... and they still are... inside someone... inside you... They're searching for their own bodies..." They pass through the gate... seeking their comrades... Ah, what a long journey this is..."

Daiga gasped at the slurred words. "Who is this old man?"

"Gerhard Grainer, former Nazi Waffen-SS Lieutenant. Born 1920. His father was a Nazi Party Gauleiter believed to have been killed in action, but he was protected at that stronghold."

Lieutenant Grainer, still in a manic state, continues talking to the camera.

"The Empire will be reborn... That glorious era will return once more... No one can stop the Empire... or them... The Führer's dream for our people will now be fulfilled... Tomorrow, the world!" He leaps from the bed, straightens his back, and performs a Nazi salute.

The interviewer asks. Who are "they"?

Lowering his outstretched arm, Lieutenant Grainer answers with a laugh.

"The demonic hordes..."

He laughs even more shrilly. The doctors step in to restrain him.

Hadley erases the image and turns back to the groaning Daiga.

"This lieutenant passed away two years later, but none of us had the slightest clue what the term 'demonic horde' referred to."

"So Dad was still alive at this point too..."

"Yeah, nobody knew the demonic horde even existed."

Hadley answered Daiga's question as if recalling the past.

"But the Ziegen Institute had already developed cryogenic rounds, making countermeasures against the undead foolproof. So they attempted another surprise attack on a newly discovered military facility in South America. But your father was repelled, suffering injuries so severe he was left paralyzed from the waist down. By a single man calling himself a Demon."

"Who was this Demon...?"

"Martin Bormann. The man known as the shadow emperor of the Nazis."

At that name, Daiga felt an indescribable dread.

Hadley projected the image of a thin-haired German man's face.

“As Chief of Staff of the Nazi Party, he served as Hitler's personal secretary in both public and private matters. Through his devious political maneuvering, he prevented those who opposed him from gaining access to Hitler and undermined the credibility of higher-ranking officials like Reich Marshal Göring and SS Chief Himmler. He alone maintained Hitler's trust. Hitler referred to him as his most loyal comrade in the Party. Bormann was chosen as the executor of Hitler's will."

“.....”

“That same Bormann, after witnessing Führer Hitler's suicide, attempted to escape Berlin only to be swallowed by the flames of war. His body was discovered by the Soviet Army... or so it should have been. But he too survived. He lived on, forming an organization called the Armed Immortal SS, reigning as its Führer!”

Hadley's voice grew increasingly heated, and the bamboo grove began to stir.

“Bormann proved impervious to cryogenic bullets and repelled the Siegengang with an unknown power surpassing even the Undead. That was humanity's first encounter with the Demon Horde!”

Daiga was speechless at this legendary tale.

Nazis, Hitler... He never imagined such things would befall him.

“So then, Hadley... Are the Demon Horde and the Undead also creations of the Nazis?”

“That's what I don't get. Do you really think that was created by human science?”

Daiga shook his head at the counterquestion. Modern times aside, the Undead had existed for nearly seventy years. Before color TV became commonplace? Could they really have created life like that?

“Guess it's my job to fill in the rest.”

Breaking the silence, the rogue sat cross-legged, clutching his empty cup.

Turning back to his grandson, the old man also sent a glance toward Lorraine.

“Your father, Walter Dietrich, spent over a year recuperating in a Berlin hospital. His rehabilitation lasted a long time too, but it was during that time in the hospital... that he met your mother.”

The rogue said this as he filled his cup with sake.

“Misuzu Hououji. My only daughter. Misuzu was in Berlin as an international nurse. Thanks to Misuzu's nursing, Walter's wounds healed... and she heard about the Fūfūryū martial arts.”

“First time I've heard that, Grandpa.”

"Misuzu is also of the Hououji clan. But she hated killing techniques... She only mastered healing arts. She traveled the world channeling Blood Souls into the sick and wounded, using her healing power."

Finally, he understood why his German father and Japanese mother had met, but his thoughts immediately turned to his father's intentions.

“So Dad tried to fight the demon hordes with martial arts?”

At Daiga's question, the old man stroked his chin and nodded.

“He was desperate, I suppose. Facing demonic hordes far beyond human strength, he searched for a way to overcome them. But the answer was slow in coming. That's when he heard about Misuzu and thought... maybe. But...”

The rogue's profile gradually darkened with sorrow.

“Walter was attacked by the Demon Hordes again in Japan. It was the Demons acting on Bolman's orders. To eradicate the Siegeng Institute, they targeted Walter...”

“But my father survived.”

“Ah, the Demon Horde was defeated. By my own hand.” He said it casually, then let out a deep sigh.

“When I first faced them, I didn't think I could win either. But the Hououji-style martial arts possessed the power to cut down the demonic hordes. Since then, the Hououji family has been drawn into this battle too.” A small carp leapt from the pond in the garden.

Watching the ripples spread with the splash, Hadley took over the story.

“Colonel Dietrich secretly informed various governments of the demonic hordes' existence and warned of the threat. If left unchecked, they'll become unstoppable. But without countermeasures, it's pointless.”

“No, wait. Then it's simple.” Daiga hurriedly interjected.

“If Phoenix-style martial arts can defeat the demon hordes... Major, you could just learn it yourself from my grandpa. Then Reiko and your unit too...”

“Walter also thought of that.” Murai stated it in a voice tinged with a certain nostalgia.

“Right after that battle, he asked me. He wanted me to teach Phoenix-style martial arts to the members of the Siegengang unit he commanded, so they could fight the demon hordes.”

“But isn't Phoenix-style passed down to only one heir?”

“That's right, Lorraine. But when the world's in crisis, you can't get hung up on that. Besides, I never managed to train a successor. Even back then, I was already an old man.”

“But his plan failed.” Muyori said this with a bitter expression.

"I too believed that passing down a technique to only one disciple was just narrow-minded pride. But that wasn't the case. Not a single soul could even master the Phoenix Style Martial Arts' Life-and-Death Techniques."

“You're kidding me, right?” Daiga himself had always thought the idea of passing down techniques to only one heir was just a bluff, but his grandpa’s profile seemed to mock his own fate.

“It's because of the Blood Soul.” Murai muttered as he poured sake into his cup.

“I thought Blood Soul was something others had too. Like the divine energy in military strategy manuals, or the qi and blood in Chinese medicine... I thought it was similar—an invisible, unknown power within humans.”

“So it's not? Then what the hell is Blood Soul?”

“Who knows? It's just... something that flows only through us, the Hououji clan...”

To the astonished Daiga, the rogue finished his sake and continued.

“I didn't realize it either. That Toubujutsu couldn't be passed on to others.”

“So then, are we the only ones in this world who can master Hououryu Toubujutsu? Are you saying only me and Grandpa have the power to cut down the Demon Horde?”

Daiga thought it ridiculous. Fighting martial arts, fought throughout Japan's dark history. He thought it was just a myth. But if it can't be passed on to others, then what exactly was his blood? And the demon hordes...

“Do the demon hordes also parasitize humans like liquid parasites?”

Reiko nodded at Daiga's pale face.

“That seems to be the case. However, the humans they parasitize must be exceptionally talented in some field... and possess the innate capacity to accept the Demon.”

“Those chosen humans are called Adaptive Hosts.” Hadley slowly sipped his cold Darjeeling tea.

“And I've come to understand. Their purpose for the abductions is to collect Adaptive Hosts. They're likely gathering those capable of becoming part of the demonic horde to bolster their numbers for the restoration of the Nazis.”

“...So the abductions were covered up too?”

“Of course. Most victims were simply recorded as missing.”

Daiga could only digest the truth. But beside him, as a chill ran through him, suddenly...

“Lorraine...” As if sensing something, the girl's blue eyes flickered.

Lorraine asked slowly, her voice trembling. “Could it be that, Mr. Hadley... my parents were…?”

“That's right. Actually, your parents were kidnapped in Switzerland twelve years ago.”

What?!... Daiga couldn't help but gasp. The sight of the rogue nodding made the boy's spine tremble. No wonder searching for them had been futile. And Daiga's mind raced with grim possibilities.

“Then... Lorraine's parents...”

“No, Daiga. It wasn't her parents who were targeted twelve years ago. It was Lorraine herself.”

Hadley's words made Lorraine gasp. “Me...?”

“Yes. They targeted you when you were just three years old. Colonel Dietrich was assigned to protect you, but the enemy mobilized not only the Undead but also the Demon Horde to seize Lorraine.”

“So, did my father have a way to defeat the demon horde back then?” When Daiga asked, Hadley shook his head.

“He didn't, apparently. He knew the power of the Phoenix-style martial arts, but the master instructor was in Japan.”

“Then how did he defeat the demon horde...”

“He could only deceive them, I'm told.” Hadley recounted the story he had heard.

“When the demon horde attacked, the Colonel set fire to Lorraine's house. He made it look like she died in the flames. Then he tried to save her. But...”

“The demon horde didn't give up. They kidnapped Lorraine's parents too.”

Reiko took over the story, brushing her black hair back.

“Though he saved Lorraine, the Colonel was troubled, I hear. Why mobilize not only the Undead but the Demon Horde to kidnap a three-year-old child? And why kidnap her parents too, once he knew it was impossible... Lorraine's abduction was an unprecedented incident.”

Lorraine had already lost her voice, covering her mouth with her hand. But Daiga challenged her, asking Reiko.
“So what was your father's answer...?”
“Lorraine possesses some special talent. That's precisely why she was chosen as the host body. And to mobilize the Demon Horde as well—she must have exceptional aptitude.”
“No...!”
“That's precisely why your father decided to hide Lorraine under Master Muyori's protection. He believed the Master could shield her from the Demon Clan's grasp.”
Ōga stood stunned for a moment, reeling from this newly revealed truth.
Indeed, she possessed an extraordinary charm.
Gentle and beloved by all, she held the power to heal people's hearts.
But what part of that charm made her suited for the Demon Clan?
“I'll never accept that!” Daiga glared at Hadley as he spoke.
“Dad's got it all wrong somewhere. Lorraine… and a Demon...”
“But here we are, targeted again after a year or two. Despite hiding our survival, they tracked us down and sent two Demons.”
“Daiga...”
“The facts prove it.” Hadley stated calmly.
Reiko nodded too, meeting Daiga's gaze directly.
“That's why Father made his decision. To have you, his son, join the fight to protect Lorraine.”
“If you have the strength and will to protect her, that is.” Daiga rejected Hadley's words with his gaze alone.
Then, turning to Reiko, he declared with resolve. “Then there was no need to test it. I've always protected her. Ever since long ago.”
Daiga looked at Lorraine again and nodded firmly with his eyes. Then the girl placed her own warmth over his hand. Lorraine, her blue eyes glistening, said nothing, only pressed her lips together.
“Fine then. I've been fighting for over twenty years now.”
Watching the two, the old man raised his cup with a calm air.
“You two are in for a long fight. Be prepared.” He cleared his throat and drained his drink.
Daiga realized his own throat was terribly parched, but tonight, no matter what he drank, sleep seemed impossible. More than the pain of his wounds, the truth was now squeezing his chest.

“...It's been a long day.” Daiga had returned to his room in the main house.
He stripped to the waist and began unwinding the bandages wrapped around his lacerations. Lorraine pressed an ice pack against his burn scars.
“Yeah... Feels like forever since we were doing that training this morning.” Lorraine said, her gaze unfocused.
Concerned, Daiga took the ice pack from her slender fingers. “You must be exhausted too. Forget about me, just go to sleep.”

“No way. You need to cool those burns first, Dai-chan. You won't be able to sleep otherwise.”
“It's fine. I don't think I'd sleep much anyway.”
“No, you can't. You went to your part-time job last night too, so you must not have gotten much sleep.”
“Listen to what the nursing student says!” Lorraine laughed, then suddenly noticed a photograph on top of the dresser. The small portrait of a baby being held radiated a gentle smile, looking like pure happiness.
“I'm... kind of worried about you, Dai-chan.”
“Me? Why?”
“Well, with everything that's happened... I wonder if your dad remembered you and Mom.”
It was true; it had been a long time since Daiga had thought about his parents.
But Lorraine must have felt the same.
“You, of all people, should know where your parents are...”
He was about to say something, but Daiga's words got caught in his throat. He knew where they were, but he still didn't know what had become of them. Especially since they'd been kidnapped by those demonic scum. It was only natural he'd be even more worried.
“I'll... find them, you hear?” Daiga said this, taking the girl's hand.
“And I'll protect you. So don't you worry.” He squeezed her hand tightly, as if to convince her.
Then Lorraine returned his grip with a gentle smile. “Daiga... you haven't changed at all.”
“What do you mean?”
“You told me the same thing when we first met. The same promise you're making now.”
Before the startled Daiga, the girl gently closed her eyes.
“When I first came to this house, you told me that, didn't you? When I was crying all the time. You said you'd find my dad and mom for me... that you'd protect me.”
“...I guess I've forgotten all about that. I...”
"I remembered it, though. All along. Because it made me so incredibly happy. So happy, so happy... I forgot all the sad things."
Lorraine wrapped both hands around Daiga's. “So I can forget this time too. Because you made your promise to me again.” She opened her eyes, revealing a radiant smile.
Daiga, too, felt an unchanging peace in that smile. Lorraine remained forever as she was when they first met.
“But Dai-chan, you were such a crybaby back then too, weren't you?”
Unaware of Daiga starting to speak, Lorraine began to laugh.
“You were lonely too, weren't you, Dai-chan? Without Papa and Mama?”
“D-don't be ridiculous! That was... I was just crying to copy you!”
Daiga pulled the futon over his head and lay down on the bed.
Ever since then, Daiga had been tormented by vivid red nightmares, crying constantly.
And when his father sent him away to Japan, he cried even more.
He thought his papa abandoned him because he was a crybaby...
“Forget about boring stuff. Enough about the past already.”

“No, I won't forget. Not a single word you said, Dai-chan.”
Lorraine gently stroked Daiga's shoulder as he turned his back.
“Because that crybaby Dai-chan really did protect me. He got stronger for me. That's why I can believe.” All of Dai-chan's promises.
Lorraine gently embraced Daiga from behind.
Without another word, she pressed her cheek against his broad back.
Daiga wanted to stay wrapped in that soft, sweet scent forever.

“What was your impression when you met Daiga for the first time?”
Muyori poured sake into his cup and gazed up at the dark night sky.
“That face of yours looks pretty dissatisfied.” Major Hadley stood in the courtyard, merely looking down at the pond's surface. Reiko sat on the veranda of the dojo, staring at the garden lantern. Across the garden, the light still burned in Taiga's room.
“Master Muyori... I was told by Colonel Dietrich. His son, Daiga, was supposed to be raised as the successor to the Phoenix-style martial arts.”
“I think he did well today.”
“He fought the demon horde twice right before my eyes. And both times, he let his opponent escape.”
“What do you mean?”
Reiko flicked her hair back. “I heard that in the Phoenix Style, after mastering the foundational techniques, you progress to combat techniques, advanced techniques, secret techniques, and ultimate secret techniques. How far has Daiga...”
“He can't use secret techniques yet. He's only just mastered combat techniques.”
“This is no joke. There's no more time for leniency.” The Major, his face flushed with anger, stepped toward the rogue.
“Is this your negligence, or Daiga's?”
“I didn't make any secret techniques of my own until I was past forty.”
The rogue downed his sake as if the Major's anger blew away on the wind.
“Even I haven't mastered all the secret techniques. All things considered, Daiga is doing pretty well.”
“Daiga MUST surpass you. Otherwise, there's only despair.” The Major's spine trembled, and the rogue laughed low.
“You're still as cold-blooded as ever – really doesn't suit that handsome face of yours.”
“You're too soft, Muyori-san. Daiga needs to be trained much more strictly.”
“I can be soft too. When I think about that kid...” With that, the Rogue slipped on his geta and stepped down into the courtyard.
The old man stood beside the tall Major, his gaze fixed on the water's surface.
“Daiga's carrying a responsibility that's too heavy for him.”
“If he doesn't do it, humanity could face extinction. If this truth were made public, people worldwide would pin their hopes on Daiga. Compared to that, right now it's still...”
“So what? It's okay for there to be at least one person here who doesn't hold out hope, right?” The Major looked back at the rogue with an expression of disbelief.
“What... Are you saying, Sensei, that you wouldn't mind if humanity were wiped out?”

“I wouldn't say that. But even if Daiga messes up, I'll never blame him.”
“...What are the odds he'll mess up?”
“Who knows.” Asked by Reiko, the rogue turned his head.
“He still hasn't faced his past. It depends on what happens to him then.”
“So Daiga still hasn't...”
“Ah, I see it. A crimson dream sinking into a sea of blood.”
Hadley and Reiko both fell silent at those words for some reason.
The rogue looked at Daiga’s bedroom, where the light still burned.
"I heard about that bastard's nightmares countless times... When he was a kid, even when he cried himself out, I couldn't do anything for him... The only way to banish nightmares is to face them yourself." If only he had the courage. The old man murmured, gazing up at the rustling bamboo grove.
His profile bore the weight of resignation and the transience of life.
That night, the light in Daiga's room remained on the entire time.

“Right now, my neck is getting tired.”
From the crimson darkness, Katarina looked down upon the Hououji residence.
In the moonlight-bathed mansion, the woman slowly licked her lips.
“Hououji Taiga's wounds have not yet healed.”
“The same goes for us. Especially since my symbiosis with my clone is quite strong.”
Dragging his body, Old Man Vow shared the same gaze.
“If my wounds don't heal, Harron won't be able to fight properly either. And now, Hououji Muyori is there. To protect that girl, he'll fight without sparing his life.”
“Throwing away your life for a woman... it's so hypocritical it makes my skin crawl.”
Katarina spat out the words in despair.
“Especially that Hououji Daiga. That kind of purity is just so annoying.”
“Seems you don't care for that little brat, eh?”
"Yeah, I hate him. He's just a wet-behind-the-ears brat fantasizing about some beautiful romance." As she said this, Katarina's face suddenly twisted into a grimace of laughter.
“Though Lorraine will soon belong to Lord Gents. Seeing the woman he loves embraced by another man should make that brat grow up.”
“Is that what you wish for?”
“Of course. I'll make the whole world taste the despair I've known.”
Katarina glared fiercely at the Hououji family.
“My lover raped my sister, stole my money, even took my research from university. Even the professor I consulted for help demanded my body in return.”
“…”
“All men are the same. They may speak of love with their mouths, but even Daiga must be one of them. So I'll teach him despair and strip away his true nature.”
Old Man Vow exhaled as if convinced. “You truly are worthy of being chosen as an Adaptive Body. For grudges are the very proof of our demonic kind.”
Katarina nodded and turned her gaze to the old man.
“Tomorrow, I'll finally have Lorraine in my grasp... We must join forces, Vow.”

“You, who despise men, trusting me?”
“Both you and I have abandoned humanity. We are neither man nor woman now.”
“Even if I act so hypocritically it makes your blood run cold?”
“What does that mean?” When Katarina asked, Old Man Vow smiled faintly.
“It means giving one's life for a woman. To me, you... are still a woman.”
The old man knelt and clasped Catarina's hand.
He gazed at her slender white fingers for a moment, then slowly kissed them.
He ran his tongue over them obsessively, taking them into his mouth and moistening them with saliva.
Catarina simply closed her eyes, lost in rapture.
"...Mmm... Mmmmm... ..... "

When Daiga woke up, he grimaced as he tried to stretch.
Was it the pain from the wound, or numbness? His body wouldn't move at all.
Looking up at the ceiling from under the futon, he saw the light was still on.
Had I fallen asleep forgetting to turn off the light?
The moment he thought this and tried to sit up, Daiga stiffened.
“...Hm... Hmm...”
The weight's true form lay draped over Daiga, snoring peacefully.
Lorraine, who'd stayed by Daiga's side, seemed to have fallen asleep without anyone noticing.
Even Daiga was stunned by the peaceful expression on the sleeping girl's face.
“What the hell... Nobody woke her... Dammit!”
Daiga started to mutter to himself before clenching his teeth in agony.
Lorraine's weight had left his lower body completely numb.
The searing pain was enough to chase away any drowsiness, but he couldn't very well just fling her off.
Unable to cry out, Daiga gently reached out to Lorraine.
“Hey, Lorraine... Wake up... Please, wake up.”
“Ha-a-a… Ha-ha-ha-ha...”
Even when her shoulders were shaken, Lorraine showed no sign of waking.
Instead, she smiled and rubbed her cheek against Daiga's futon.
“...Such delicious cake... so much of it...”
“You didn't make this cake yourself, did you?”
Daiga stared at Lorraine for a moment as she dreamed blissfully.
What did the demon horde want from Lorraine? He couldn't fathom it.
Weren't they fundamentally polar opposites?
Or was there some other reason... Just as Daiga thought this,
“This is...”
Daiga spotted a dark red birthmark on the nape of Lorraine's neck.
Looking back, he realized it when attacked by the strange dragon.
He'd thought it was just something bumped against in the swaying bus.
But up close, it wasn't a birthmark at all.
“This is... A tattoo...” That couldn't be. Daiga rubbed his eyes.

But it wasn't an illusion either. A groan escaped him involuntarily.
Moreover, it was a meticulously drawn, crouching figure.
The hunched-over person had long hair flowing down their back.
The sharply curved waist and ample bosom were unmistakably female.
Though the lowered profile was unclear, it seemed strikingly beautiful.

“Who the hell did this to you...?”
Daiga gently reached out his fingertips toward the tattoo. Then he stiffened even more.
The tattoo suddenly straightened its hunched back and freely stretched out its limbs.
This is absurd. Was he dreaming?
But even as he tried to deny it, the tattoo writhed its limbs like a living woman.
Then it slid over Lorraine's skin like it was swimming, disappearing inside her shirt.
“No way...”
If he could, he'd strip Lorraine's clothes off and check again.
But as if reading Daiga's mind, the tattooed woman reappeared from the shirt's cuff.
She writhed as if flaunting her naked body, advancing toward the back of Lorraine's hand. Then she slowly lifted her gaze toward Daiga.
She was smiling quietly. With a confident, assured look in her eyes.
Daiga resolved himself, grasped Lorraine's hand, and tried to capture the tattoo.
But the tattoo dodged him, hiding back inside her shirt sleeve once more.
Then, it peeked out from the cuff again, its bewitching lips curling into a sly smile.
It was alive. And it was enjoying this game of chase.
Daiga clasped Lorraine's hand once more, this time with greater force. In that instant...
“Mmm... Hmmmm...”
Lorraine slowly opened her eyelids.
She gave a small yawn, then sat up straight, stretching her back.
Then she finally realized her hand was being held by Daiga.
“Ah, I... um... where is this... Why, Dai-chan...”
“Ah, no, this is...!”
Daiga frantically shook her hand free, and the tattoo vanished back into her clothes.
Lorraine looked around, glanced at the clock, then looked down at herself.
When she turned her eyes back to Daiga, the boy was still shirtless.
Realizing the truth, Lorraine flushed bright red all the way up to her neck.
“Ah, Dai-chan, I... yesterday, I was here...”
“Yeah, looks like I fell asleep.”
“But this is so sudden... we haven't even...”
“No, it's not like we're anything... I mean, just holding hands now...”
But Daiga couldn't bring himself to mention the tattoo.
Once on the tatami in the room, and once more after stepping out into the hallway, stumbling as he went. He hoped no one would misunderstand the scream he let out from sheer embarrassment.
Daiga thought this, roughly scratching his gold and black hair.
A light drizzle fell quietly on the early morning garden.
Paying no mind to the rain, Daiga, having changed clothes, was heading for the dojo.
The tattoo etched into Lorraine swirled within his brain. If that tattoo had anything to do with the demon horde... no, he couldn't think of any other explanation.
He had to inform Major Hadley and the others. And should he tell Lorraine the truth?
As Daiga thought this and stepped toward the dojo entrance... “Please, let me see Lorraine!” A familiar woman's voice echoed from the gate.
Turning around, Daiga called her name without thinking.

“.....Ogawa, why are you here.....”
When their eyes met, Miki froze in place.
Before her stood two men in suits, side by side.
Daiga rushed over to Miki and pushed Hadley's men away.
“No need to worry about this girl. She's our friend.”
The men nodded and backed off. Daiga turned his gaze to Miki.
“You okay? Yesterday...?”
“I should be asking YOU that!” Miki's angry voice sounded slightly different than usual.
“What happened to Lorraine?! When the fire broke out at the hospital, she was already gone... I was worried sick!”
“Ah, she's fine. More importantly, are you hurt?”
“I just fainted, so they said I could go home this morning... That's why I came here first. When I asked the hospital staff, they said you were coming to pick me up.”
Then Miki's eyes fixed straight on Taiga's arm. Seeing the deep scar still there, the girl swallowed something rising in her throat. “...What? You're hurt too, aren't you?”
“Ah, this? From the fire.”
“Of course... You got hurt protecting Lorraine, didn't you?”
“Wh-what? No, shut up...”
“You just forgot about me and went home, didn't you?”
Daiga noticed Miki's tightly clenched fist.
Facing the girl who wouldn't meet his gaze, Ōga bit his lip.
“Lorraine said she wanted to stay... by your side... But during the fire chaos, I didn't have time to look for you.”
“...Why?”
“Because Lorraine was being targeted” Daiga spoke quietly, stringing his words together.
“You saw it too at Gaien, didn't you? The attack... Those guys are persistent. If I stayed with you and we got attacked again, it'd cause trouble. That's why I went into hiding for now.”
“Lorraine said that?”
“No, it was my decision. I didn't want to drag you into this. I thought you would...”
He thought she would understand. Daiga gently touched Miki's shoulder.
“Why I was attacked... I can't tell you that either. But keeping it from you is for your own good.”
“...I don't want that... I want to know.”
“Ogawa, you...”
“I hate being left out like this!”
Miki's hands grabbed Daiga's shirt.
It was with such force it made him stagger.
But despite her tone, kindness radiated from Miki's hands.
“Ogawa, I...”
“Miki-chan!” Suddenly, Lorraine's voice rang out behind them.
Turning, they saw the blonde girl standing still in the garden.
Her usual smile was gone. Lorraine murmured apologetically.
“...Miki-chan, I'm sorry about yesterday.”

“Lorraine, I...”
“Looks like I won't be able to go to school for a while.”
Lorraine told her this with an awkward smile.
“The reason... I think there'll come a day when I can tell you. So until then... I want you to wait for me.”
“You're going to shut me out too!”
“No, I just don't want to drag you into this.” Lorraine shook her head and stepped closer to Miki.
“We're friends... I don't want to be a bother.”
“I want you to be a bother! BECAUSE we're friends!”
Miki let go of Daiga and stood in front of Lorraine, her face a mix of tears and a smile.
"...We are, right, Lorraine...?
Daiga agonized over how to handle Miki's feelings.
But before he could gather his thoughts, Daiga's senses caught something.
Hostility pierced his spine. Close. But where was it coming from?
A faint vibration reached his toes, then raced up his entire body.
Not footsteps. A power stirring deep beneath the earth's surface. And immediately...
“Run! Both of you!”
The instant he shouted, Lorraine and Miki vanished from his sight.
Panicking, Daiga scanned the area.
He immediately spotted the two girls' faces. Right at his feet..
“Dai-chan!” “Daiga!” With a scream, the two girls looked down at themselves.
Their lower bodies were instantly sinking into the earth.
Only the ground beneath their feet had suddenly collapsed, forming a mortar-shaped trap.
The earth had been crushed into fine powder, leaving no trace to follow.
Daiga swiftly grabbed the arms of the two girls being swallowed deep into the ground.
“Hold on!” Gripping Lorraine in his right hand and Miki in his left, he stepped firmly onto the safe ground above. But Daiga clenched his teeth against the unexpectedly fierce force.
It felt as if the two of them were being pulled into the earth by someone lurking beneath.
“Aaaah!” Screams escaped Lorraine and Miki's mouths simultaneously.
Pain seemed to shoot through the bodies caught in the tug-of-war between Daiga and the antlion. Yet Ohga couldn't let go of their hands.
“Grab my arms with both hands! Keep climbing up!”
Even so, the antlion's strength was too great for the girls to resist.
If this continued, their bodies would be torn apart.
Just as Daiga tried to call for help from the main house...
“I knew you'd do that, Daiga Hououji.”
A gust of wind swept through the courtyard alongside the woman's voice.
Emerging right in the midst of it was the demoness, clad once more in her scarlet suit.
“Sacrificing your life for a woman... Your naive thoughts, boy, are so predictable and amusing.”
“Katarina...!” Glaring at the woman who materialized from nothing, Daiga gritted his teeth. But to the three who couldn't move an inch, Katarina kept smiling.

“As Lorraine's boyfriend, your actions pass muster. But as a warrior, you fail. You can do nothing now. You can't use Phoenix-style martial arts.”
“So that was your goal!”
“Of course. Take away the use of both hands, and you can wield neither the Suzaku Blade nor the Byakko Fist. And if you escape using Seiryu’s Wings, Lorraine becomes mine.” Katarina said, twisting her red lips.
It was a strategy knowing that Daiga was a practitioner of the Hououji-style martial arts.
Moreover, it was a deadly trap that exploited the bond between Daiga and Lorraine.
“And before you use the Genbu Shield, I'll kill you. Right in front of her.”
Miki was stunned by the sudden appearance of the woman.
Daiga clenched his teeth... then suddenly shouted at Lorraine.
“You idiot! Don't let go!” He pulled Lorraine back with brute force.
But the blonde girl was trying to pull away from Daiga instead.
“Let go, Dai-chan! Then...”
“That's right. If you let him go, Daiga will be saved.”
Katarina suddenly addressed Lorraine in a polite tone.
“Our objective is Lorraine Rosenberg... only you. Once we have you, we have no further need for Daiga Hououji. We could even spare his life.”
“Who would believe such nonsense!” Daiga fought against the intensifying power of the ant hell.
“You dragged Miki into this too, even though she had nothing to do with it!”
“Daiga!” Daiga nodded firmly to Miki, who clung to him with both hands.
He never wanted her to suffer like this. That was precisely why he couldn't tell her the truth.
But no way out of this perilous situation could be found. Just as desperation was rising,
“It's too late to show up now!”
Suddenly, Katarina spun around and held her palm toward the sky.
What descended upon her was a barrage of countless freezing bullets.
Hadley and the others' gunfire was narrowly blocked by the spatial fluctuations Katarina created - but they knew the attack wouldn't work. Hadley's intent was to buy time.
“Daiga, now!” Hadley scattered his men and threw smoke grenades into the garden.
“We'll draw her attention! Quickly, get Lorraine out...!”
Even Katarina couldn't defend against simultaneous attacks from multiple directions.
Hadley knew this, hiding in the white smoke as he sent his men left and right.
But the thick smoke screen suddenly dissipated, blown away by a gust of wind from above.
Reiko, who had rushed to the scene later, looked up at the rain cloud and shouted.
“Richard, he's here! From yesterday..!”
What stood before them was a deafening roar.
The monstrous dragon spread its wings and dove down, launching a fierce attack on Hadley and the others with its drool-covered fangs.
“Its outer hide is tough! Aim for the weak spots!”
Hadley crossed his dual pistols, aiming to pierce the dragon's maw.

But the dragon kicked one man aside with its foreleg and sent another tumbling to the ground with a flash of its tail.
Watching her comrades fall helplessly, Reiko gripped her mobile video communicator.
“This is Sakimizu, requesting backup! To the Hououji residence...”
But all Reiko heard was terrible static.
Daiga noticed too, seeing the blood drain from Reiko's face.
All this commotion. Why aren't the neighbors making a fuss?
Then he looked up at the sky and froze. The rain-filled sky was stained red.
“Daiga...” Lorraine noticed the anomaly too.
The clouds had stopped moving, and the birds hung motionless in the air.
It was as if only this house was isolated behind a crimson barrier.
The color of blood... a crimson hue reminiscent of a nightmare.
“You are now trapped prey.” A raspy voice rose from the back of the monstrous dragon.
“This house now lies within my domain. Sound and vibration are blocked, and even the flow of time differs from the outside world. Escape is impossible.”
The one who let out a booming laugh was a small, old man.
His skin was an unnaturally pale blue—proof of a dweller of darkness, estranged from sunlight.
His hair was white and wildly disheveled, only the blackness of his shabby clothes standing out.
His eyes were wide open, devoid of pupils, only the bloodshot whites glinting fiercely.
“My name is Vow Guen Ian, Demon Lord of the Netherworld. I have come to claim that girl with my legacy cursed gate, Harron's Flying Dragon. If you interfere, I shall crush you.” But what sent a chill through Daiga was the old man's chest.
There, spread across his skin, was a tattoo of a monstrous dragon spreading its wings.
Moreover, the tattoo flapped its wings, writhing with vivid, pulsing life.
“Th-that tattoo...!” Just as Daiga began to speak, the aged demon lord addressed Lorraine.
“You are returning. With us.”
“I am… Returning...?” As Lorraine responded, the tattoo on the old man's chest screeched shrilly.
“Indeed. To the other side... to the world we once belonged to.”
Daiga gasped at that answer.
Lorraine had been chosen as the Adaptor. That was precisely why she was being targeted.
Hadley had explained it last night, and Daiga had believed it too.
But Vow's reply contained something more.
Moreover, the tattoo etched onto the Demon looked identical to Lorraine's.
No way... that can't be...
“What do you intend to do with Lorraine...!”
As Daiga groaned, the strange dragon's wings slowly flapped.
From there spun a tornado-like, invisible onslaught.
Reiko bounced off the ground, Hadley crashed into a lantern.
After the gale blew off roof tiles and flattened trees, no one remained unscathed.
“Reiko! Hadley!”

Only Daiga remained standing.
Glancing at the people groaning in agony, Katarina let out a mocking laugh.
“We have no use for the powerless. Our enemy is only the Hououji-style practictioner.”
“Quite right. Still, Master, you're making us rush.”
Old Man Vow turned his gaze toward the main house, now half-collapsed.
“Even after all this racket we've made, he still won't show himself?”
The demons' words made Daiga remember.
And then he felt it. His grandfather's aura.
A gust swept past, and beyond the swirling dust, he appeared.
The massive form of Hōōji Muyori stood there, utterly indifferent.
“I sure don't want to get old, Daiga.” Suddenly, Daiga's name was called.
Muyori twisted his wrist and growled low.
“It takes time to refine Blood Souls, you know.”
“.....Master Muyori, you mustn't go out!” Hadley cried out from where he lay collapsed in the courtyard.
“If you fall, who will lead us forward...!”
“I'm sick of your lectures, Hadley.” With an air of annoyance, the rogue faced the two Demons.
“As if I haven't already put my grandchildren through hell. If I don't hit him back at least once here, I'll never feel satisfied.” But contrary to his words, the rogue showed no fighting spirit, and still didn’t conjure a crimson blade.
Rather, his slumped, limp posture seemed to suggest he'd given up on the fight.
“At last, you’ve shown yourself, Phoenix Temple Rogue.”
Katarina closed the distance, smiling.
“But what's with that stance? You're practically wide open.”
“Ah, the sadness of growing old. My strength is no longer what it once was.”
Vow leapt down from the dragon's back, licking his lips.
“I feel for you. Now all you can do is buy time for your grandchildren.”
In that instant, the dragon vanished.
A furious gust of wind followed, closing in on the rogue.
Its movements were undeniably faster than yesterday. Was this the effect of being within Vow’s territory? As if leaping through space, the monstrous dragon appeared behind the rogue.
“Face Harron, who didn't fall even after taking the Great Fang's blade!”
Vow declared with brimming confidence.
“How could you, an old man, possibly dodge its blows? How could you possibly defeat it?”
A claw-like battle axe descended, intent on tearing through his flesh.
But there was no sign of the rogue dodging it, and Lorraine cried out involuntarily.
“Grandpa!” But the rogue's hand, which had spun around swiftly, already clutched a crimson light. He threw his entire weight behind it, swinging the phoenix blade upward. The flash that pierced the dragon’s abdomen raced straight through to its chest, then its neck, in an instant.
A single strike. The monstrous dragon was cleaved in two, its screams fading away.

Simultaneously, a slash tore through Old Man Vow, sending rainbow-colored bodily fluid flying everywhere.
“You... you bastard!”
“The Great Fang's blade carries a different weight.”
Turning back, the rogue casually slung the Suzaku Blade over his shoulder.
“No need to dodge anything coming at it. Just draw them in and cut.”
The Demons froze in place, utterly transfixed.
Hadley and Reiko were both speechless at the sheer terror of the blade's wind grazing their cheeks. But the one trembling most was Daiga.
Muyori’s stance, which seemed wide open, was a lure to draw the enemy in.
Even if struck, he had absolute confidence he'd seize the initiative.
A strike that abandoned evasion, channeling all his Blood Soul into its power. No chance.
“I don't wanna get old, Daiga.” The rogue called out once more.
“Dodging's become a pain in the ass.” No. The truth was, he simply didn't have the reserves left to dodge.
He can deliver a heavier, more powerful blow than Daiga, but he doesn't possess Daiga's stamina. That's precisely why Muyori aimed for a single, decisive strike.
“As expected of Hōōji Muyori. Your skills surpass what I've heard.”
Katarina extended both arms, preparing to strike.
“But now that Daiga cannot fight, it's just you alone.”
“Indeed. Daiga lacks the strength to cut you down.”
Old Man Vow stroked his writhing tattoos.
“And you are an old man too. I see right through you—you cannot fight for long.”
But the rogue smirked faintly.
“The Hououji Style wields life and death freely. Even if you lack the power to slay enemies, Daiga, you possess the power to save lives.”
That's right. He stared at the eyes calling out to him.
How long do you plan to dawdle?
Grandpa's... no, the master's gaze made it clear.
Realizing this, Daiga shouted forcefully at the two girls.
“Don't let go of my hands!”
At that powerful voice, Katarina turned around.
But Taiga had already released the refined blood soul.
“Ah!” “What is this?!” Lorraine and Miki gasped at the distinct vitality surging through their arms - Daiga had channeled the Blood Soul as if to heal another's wounds.
That power traveled through the girls' arms, coursed through their bodies, and gushed forth from their legs buried in the earth.
The Blood Soul erupting from the bottom of the ant lion pit transformed into a blue light... the wings of Seiryu.
And in one swift push, it lifted the two sinking bodies back up to the surface.
“Kyaaaaaah!”
The two burst from the earth, their momentum propelling them several meters into the air, then Daiga firmly grabbed them by their arms.

The boy clad in the Seiryu's wings leapt backward, immediately shielding the pair with his back.
"Hide! Quickly!" "Damn you, Daiga!"
Katarina swept her hands left and right, preparing to unleash a flame strike.
Daiga, maintaining his Seiryu wings, charged Katarina head-on - he flew with such speed it left no afterimage, shaping the Suzaku Blade with his Blood Soul.
Suddenly, Harron tried to spew the same corrosive black liquid from yesterday.
"Dai-chan!" Lorraine screamed, recalling yesterday's attack.
Even Katarina halted her steps at the dying strength of the old Demon.
But the viscous fluid that splattered toward Daiga was blocked by a jet-black barrier.
With his right hand, Daga drew his blade, and in the same motion, his left hand conjured the Genbu Shield.
"Let the flesh be cut to sever the bone... I don't dislike that tactic."
"You... you brat...!"
"So even the Demons protect women... I'll remember that." Daiga said this to the gnashing-toothed Vow.
In the next instant, Daiga whipped his Suzaku Blade around.
Ignoring the overflowing slime, he slashed Vow diagonally.
The Phoenix Blade, as if heated, instantly vaporized the spurting substance.
"Gahhh!" The old man let out a scream and lurched backward.
Simultaneously, the tattoos etched into his skin screamed out.
As Daiga withdrew, the demon coughed up its own blood-tinged vomit.
"Well... it certainly is different from yesterday... I suppose a day for the young yields more than a day for the old... However..."
The demon muttered intermittently, its aged eyes gleaming.
"Can you sacrifice yourself as completely as I, Daiga of Phoenix Temple?!"
Suddenly, Old Man Vow's body cracked and shattered with a hard, brittle sound.
His claws seized Daiga and pinned him down with terrifying brute strength.
"You...!" Daiga thrust his crimson blade into the clinging old man.
The blade pierced his belly, emerging through his back. Fresh blood spattered into the air.
Even so, the old man's strength did not wane; his claws dug into Daiga's flesh and bone.
"Vow, stop it! If you still have breath... come with me...!" Even Katarina let out a scream at that gruesome sight.
But Old Man Vow looked at her with a satisfied expression.
"I can no longer go with you! But that's fine!"
The old man threw his weight onto Daiga's body, plunging them both toward the ground.
"Katalina, take that one with you! I fear not death to protect you!"
Vow's roar conveyed a self-sacrifice, a disregarded his own life.
Could such a brutal, savage demons harbor emotions akin to humans?
To the astonished Daiga, Old Man Vow smiled, his face covered in blood.
"This is how my country fights. No matter how many Vietnamese the American army kills, we fight on until our will is broken, and we win. Can you break my will?"
Facing the questioning demon, Daiga shook off the fleeting sympathy that had welled up.

“I saw it! Your will...!” Daiga shouted, channeling his blood soul into the thrusting blade.
The blood soul unleashed from the phoenix blade raced through every corner of the old man's flesh.
It writhed violently within his body, then erupted simultaneously from Vow's form.
“Katarinaaaaaahhh...!” The old man Vow was blown away, transforming into black vapor mid-air.
The black gas rising toward the heavens… is this how demons die?
As that thought crossed Daiga's mind, the old man's thoughts echoed in his ears.
“I've fought all my life in the dark depths of the earth... The Indochina War... The Vietnam War… I always, always wanted to live in the bright world. That dream was fulfilled... just a little... just… a little...”
Kneeling, Daiga stared into the wind, still gripping the Suzaku Blade.
He trembled at Vow's fighting spirit, so fierce it demanded battle... no, even respect.
But Katarina squeezed out a heart-wrenching scream.
“Why are you dying now, Vow! It's almost... almost over!”
The demoness's hair rustled as she gazed up at the crimson sky.
“Lord Gentsu! Did you hear Vow's voice?! Lord Gentsu, ahhh!”
Whose name was being torn out in that cry?
Just as Daiga wondered, Lorraine's voice sounded behind him.
“Dai-chan.....!” Her posture shielding Miki—had she sensed something?
Daiga gave the two girls a strong nod.
“Don't worry. I'll protect you.”
But as if mocking his resolve, the crimson sky trembled.
A stagnant thought spread through Daiga's ears—no, deep within his heart.
“You said the same thing back then too, Daiga Hououji. You stood before us, vowing to protect us. But... it seems you don't remember.”
Daiga scanned his surroundings. He sensed no presence. Yet why did his heart pound?
Then suddenly, a flash like thunderclap exploded around them.
Lightning burst, blinding his eyes. A deafening roar convulsed, and great trees split.
Daiga shouted to Lorraine and Miki.
“Duck! This is...!”
And his thoughts transformed into words.
“Celestial Demon Horde, Gentsu Quadar.”
A man in a black long coat materialized from nothingness. A grim-faced, burly middle-aged man. His sinister gaze held a fierce desire for vengeance.
The demonic figure calling himself Gentsu raised his withered right hand.
“Long time no see, Daiga Hououji.”
Along with his voice, a thick wave of thoughts assaulted Daiga.
Cracking his dry knuckles, Gentsu declared,
“The time has finally come to settle our debt.”
“What are you talking about? You've got the wrong guy. I don't recognize you.”
An invisible killing intent radiated from Gentsu's entire body.
The sheer pressure made Daiga instinctively step back.
He had truly never encountered a man who could project such an aura before.

“If you wish to know, I'll remind you.”
The thought responded, letting out a smirk.
“But I warn you, you'll regret it. You had finally forgotten, after all.”
“I forgot...?”
What exactly... when exactly...?
For some reason, a vivid red nightmare flashed through Daiga's mind.
Cold sweat poured out. Why was he remembering that dream now?
What the hell had he forgotten? When Daiga asked himself that question...
“Mama... Mama, where did you go...”
Suddenly, a child's voice rang out, and Daiga's body stiffened for an instant.
But what appeared before him out of nowhere was a little boy.
Still young. About three years old, perhaps. The color of his hair...
“Ah... ahh...!” Suddenly, Daiga's body convulsed as if stiffening.
The Blood Soul coursing through his limbs vanished, and Daiga collapsed to his knees on the ground. Lorraine rushed toward Daiga, who let out a cry.
“Dai-chan, what on earth...!” But the one who turned at her voice was the boy who had appeared. And the moment he saw Lorraine, he beamed at her.
“Ah, Mama! Mama!” Lorraine stared wide-eyed at the boy waving his hand.
His hair was a mix of blond and black.
Reiko and Hadley both understood the boy's identity.
And the rogue had taken that child from his father over a decade ago.
“Daiga... you...?”
Daiga tried to move his body but it wouldn’t budge an inch.
His heart pounds with terror. What on earth happened to him when he was three?
The moment Daiga thought it, something splattered onto the young Daiga.
Crimson blood. His small body stained scarlet.
It was like a dream. The same nightmare he'd been seeing all along.
“Noooooo!” Lorraine's anguished scream clung to Daiga's ears, echoing.
He heard a scream like that back then too. But who was screaming?
Could it be... could it be that what he forgot was...
“It's said that when humans experience terror beyond their limits, the shock can cause them to erase that experience from their memory. Unconsciously, of course.”
Gentsu declared, his voice gradually growing stronger.
“Daiga Hououji... Was that past so painful for you that you couldn't bear to remember it? But for me too... it was a defeat I could never forget.”
The Celestial Demon calmly closed the distance, but Daiga couldn't move a finger.
Worse still, his very thoughts had frozen in the face of that icy killing intent.
Am I going to die? - Daiga asked himself in that instant.
“NOOOOOO!” A furious strike flew toward Gentsu.
The crimson blade flashed. Muyori had launched a surprise attack on the demon from the side. The demon was already within striking distance. There was no way to dodge it. But just as he was about to cleave through him, Muyori came to an abrupt halt.
“Guh...!”
The rogue let out a cry, and everyone gasped.

Unbelievably, Gents had seized the blade of the rogue's sword with one hand.
Muyori strained with all his might, trying to thrust the crimson blade forward.
But with his mummified, withered right hand, Gents shattered the blade effortlessly.
“Old samurai, I'll teach you something before you die.”
The demon, cloaked in a long coat, gave a slight flick of the wrist.
“A king dwells within my hand.”
The old man fell in slow motion, without even a scream.
Blood gushed from his chest and mouth.
Before anyone could react, a jet-black saber was clenched in Gentsu's hand.
The sweeping arc of that blade, black even to its tip, surpassed even the rogue's own ferocity. The rogue's massive frame was sent flying across the pond.
“Grandpa!” Katarina soared toward Lorraine, who had cried out.
Her figure, dancing toward her prey with a roar of laughter, resembled a predatory bird.
But Hadley stood fiercely before the demoness. “Run, Lorraine!”

Hadley tried to buy time by quickly unholstering both pistols.
Ignoring the pain, Reiko drew her Beretta and ran to protect the girl.
But the flames unleashed by Katarina engulfed both their bodies.
“Useless struggle!” The enormous, billowing flames slammed Hadley back to the ground.
And Reiko, too, was serving as Lorraine's shield.
“Kyaaaah!” Flames clinging to her suit leapt, trying to scorch Reiko's skin.
But suddenly, Lorraine leapt onto the screaming Reiko.
“Reiko-san, I'm jumping!”
Flames leap onto Lorraine's clothes. But she pushes him down regardless.
She plunges into the pond to extinguish the flames, hot steam billowing up.
“Impressive... That's exactly what a chosen one should be.”
Gents lets out a voice of admiration, raising his saber in salute.
“Such unreserved love is more than enough to end our wandering.”
Water dripping from her, Lorraine rises from the pond.
The girl lays the unconscious Reiko on the edge of the pond and faces the horde of demons.
Gentsu smiles. In that confrontation, Daiga saw despair.
I'm the only one left... Even knowing this, Daiga's body wouldn't move.
If this continues, everything will be over. Just as Daiga was about to succumb to despair...
“If you come any closer, I'll shoot.”
Lorraine's hand gripped Reiko's pistol. But the muzzle wasn't aimed at the demon horde—it was pressed against her own temple.
The girl faced the demons with a resolute gaze.
“And if you hurt the people I care about... I'll shoot myself.”
Daiga, and even the demon, revealed utter astonishment.
The taut tension brought a silence to the surroundings.
Eventually, catching her breath, Katarina's throat convulsed.
“.....You couldn't possibly shoot me..... You're in the business of saving lives.”
As she spoke, the demoness regained her smile.
“That's right. You know the value of life. You couldn't possibly shoot me.....”
But Lorraine cocked the Beretta's hammer without hesitation.
She stared directly at the silent demon, Gentsu.
“If you kill the people here, I die too. I won't let you have your way.”
“Then... what if I promise not to kill them?”
“I'll go with you. No matter what happens to me.”
Daiga wanted to drown out those words with his own scream.
You idiot. Why would you say something like that?
You're not protecting me. I'm protecting you.
Even the demonic horde Gentsu swallowed his astonishment and looked down at the petite girl. “Why... are you able to do this?”
“I shall dedicate myself for the happiness of those entrusted to my care.” Lorraine declared firmly.

“I don't want to see anyone get hurt for my sake anymore... That's all.”
Daiga could only stare at Lorraine.
Her expression bore no shadow of a doubt, only a detached strength.
A strength that would yield to nothing, retreat to nothing.
“Oh...” Katarina knelt where she stood, lowering her face before Lorraine.
“What devotion... what compassion... from a mere human...”
“If we have been disrespectful, we humbly beg your forgiveness.”
Even Gentsu knelt, prostrating himself before the girl.
It was nothing less than the salute of a subject.
“You have not only been chosen, but you have already become the guide.”
“...What do you mean?”
“You will understand if you come with us. Yes, you… will become my wife.”
When the demon leader Gentsu spoke, the last remnants of Daiga's Blood Soul boiled over. Only his throat could barely move, his scream reduced to a mere groan.
Even so, Daiga managed to voice the girl's name.
“...Don't go... Lorraine!”
But Lorraine lowered her face, averting her eyes from Daiga's cry.
Instead, she turned to Miki, who was still unable to speak, and gave her a small smile.
“Miki-chan... please take care of Dai-chan.”
“Lorraine, you...”
“Dai-chan, I can only ask you... because there's no one else but Miki-chan.”
In that instant, Miki also cried out Lorraine's name.
But Dai could hear nothing, see nothing anymore.
The ground shook, darkness closed in, and the demon horde and Lorraine's figure vanished. Daiga reached out, trying to follow, but his body wouldn't move.
Only a single tear trickled down his cheek.
Just like back then... when his mother was killed.
Gnawing on his own weakness and the resurrected memory, Daiga lost consciousness.
On that dark Sunday morning.

【Chapter 4】

A naked woman swims through the dark, pulsing void.
Her long hair shimmers iridescent, her white skin glows with an eerie, lustrous sheen.
Spreading her limbs wide, she sways her hips, her ample bosom swaying invitingly.
She is the tattoo woman. Daiga reached out toward her form. And froze in shock.
“I must return, Daiga,” she said, scattering a smile.
“To the place where we were born, beyond the gate that gave us life.”
Innocent blue eyes. A pitifully small mouth. He couldn't believe his eyes.
But the woman's face was unmistakably Lorraine's.
“You...!” Shockwaves of pain shot through his body as he bolted upright. Then the soft feel of the bed.
A nurse in a white coat hurriedly called out. “Hououji-san, you mustn't get up yet!”

Pure white walls. A spacious hospital room. Outside the window, darkness and a howling storm. Lying in bed, Daiga was bandaged and hooked up to an IV.
A nurse in a white uniform hurriedly called out. “Hououji-san, you can't get up yet!”
His body, seemingly fractured in multiple places, was immobilized by casts, unable to move an inch. “Where... where am I...?”
“It's the Defense Agency in Ichigaya. Everyone else is here too.”
Looking around, he saw Muyori in the bed next to him.
But his grandfather had an oxygen mask over his mouth, surrounded by doctors with serious expressions.
And the members of the security detail were also receiving treatment scattered throughout the large ward. Remembering the defeat and the loss of Lorraine, Daiga clenched the sheets. “Don't worry about gramps. He just came out of the ICU.”
Turning around, there sat Reiko with her arm in a sling.
“Like you, I managed to survive, but I won't be able to move for a while.”
“Damn it... What about you, then?”
“Hadley and I have fractures and burns... But whether we're truly saved is questionable.”
Daiga turned his still-blurred eyes toward a corner of the room.
Several TV monitors displayed breaking news.
‘Repeating. Currently, the Toei Oedo Line, Asakusa Line, and Tokyo Metro Ginza Line are suspended across their entire routes. As of 1:00 PM, there is no estimated time for service restoration.’
'Traffic restrictions and checkpoints are currently in place throughout Chuo Ward and Minato Ward. To allow passage for police and emergency vehicles, please refrain from traveling by car.'
Daiga snapped at Reiko impatiently.
“What the hell is going on...”
“We're going to find out.”
Major Hadley approached Daiga, blocking the screen.
He was already dressed in black combat gear, fully equipped.
“Three hours ago, there was a derailment on the Oedo subway line. The site is near Tsukiji Station.”
“Tsukiji... Right now, that place...”
“Dozens dead, twice that number missing.”
“...Is this related to the demon horde?”
“That's precisely why they didn't disclose the accident cause and sealed off the area. Look.” Behind the Major, one of his subordinates played footage on a monitor.
Dark subway tracks. Apparently a recording video shot from the driver's seat.
Its path was blocked by something, causing a violent jolt, and then it ended.
“It was just a split second. With your visual acuity and concentration, you should be able to tell.”
At Hadley's words, Daiga silently nodded.
What appeared was an object larger than the train itself. And it was undoubtedly a living creature. Its exact shape remained unclear, but it bore a striking resemblance to a liquid parasite.

“We issued an evacuation advisory centered on Tsukiji 5-chome. We rescued the injured, but the derailed cars remain where they are. They say there's a risk of fire and toxic gas...” As Reiko continued, Daiga sat up in bed.
“I'm going too...” But his strength failed him. He slid off the bed and slammed onto the floor.
Still, Daiga crawled forward awkwardly, looking up at Hadley's face.
“Lorraine is there... If she's not, I'll ask the demons where she is... So take me with you.”
“Daiga, don't push yourself!” Reiko frantically tried to lift him up.
But Daiga pushed her hands away and stood up under his own power.
“Shut up... I just feel so damn... helpless right now...”
All this time, Daiga thought he was pushing himself to train harder.
He thought he'd gotten stronger by mastering the Hououji-style Martial Arts.
But now he can't do anything. He can't protect the ones he wants to protect. Instead, he's the one being protected. And now his inner weakness is laid bare for all to see.
What the hell had these past ten-odd years been for?
As the feeling of defeat washed over him, Daiga slumped weakly onto the bed.
“...I hate myself.”
Reiko silently watched Daiga groan.
Hadley, however, sighed once and straightened his posture.
“Unfortunately, you're not combat-ready in your current state. Wait here for our return.”
“True, I lost...”
“You remembered your past. Until you overcome that fear, you cannot defeat Gents.”
Daiga recalled his own rigid body. But he shook off the memory and fixed his gaze on Hadley. “Next time I fight, I'll win... I won't suffer the same fate again.”
“It's a gamble with low odds. I cannot stake my future on you.”
“Then... can you win alone? Against... that Celestial Demon?”
Hadley, for some reason, did not answer Daiga's question.
And then Daiga realized. What he sensed from Hadley wasn't fighting spirit, but a sense of doom.
Reiko, standing beside him, also darkened her expression and silently looked down.
“Hadley... you... don't tell me...!”
“Excuse me. The sortie time is approaching.”
“You mean to defeat them without regard for Lorraine?!”
Hadley and the others' mission was not to protect Lorraine.
Their true duty was to annihilate the demon horde.
It was hardly surprising they would adopt tactics that disregarded Lorraine's life or death.
“If you had been here, we wouldn't have had to resort to such measures.”
Still facing away, Hadley spoke quietly.
“I'm sorry about this too... but we can't afford to be picky about how we break through this situation.” Hadley burst into the hallway, shaking off Daiga's gaze.
Daiga rose from the bed, trying to catch his retreating figure.
“Wait, Hadley!” But Daiga immediately stumbled and fell. He couldn't even stand on his own two feet.
Still, leaning against the wall, he moved forward. Reiko hurriedly rushed over.

“You can't do this! Not in that condition!”
But pushing Reiko's restraining hands aside, Daiga stepped out into the hallway.
Then, before Daiga, appeared Miki, her arm wrapped in bandages.
Miki stood frozen in place, her face blank. “What the hell are you doing... If you move now...!”
"... Glad you're okay, Ogawa." Saying only that, he started to walk away.
But Daiga collapsed back onto the floor, blood spilling from his mouth. Miki wrapped her arms around his coughing back, crying.
“Don't move! You just barely made it!” Yet in his heart, Daiga pushed Miki's words away. Daiga's hope was to fight again, to win, to save...
And so, he wondered…
With such a crushing defeat etched into my soul, and no chance to save Lorraine…
Can I truly say I've been saved? Is there any value in my life?
As these thoughts filled Daiga's mind, a pure chorus reached his ears from somewhere.
The song echoing through the wind and rain was one he knew well.
Amazing Grace.
Daiga called out to Miki.
“Where is that singing coming from...?”
“....What are you talking about, Daiga? I can't hear any singing.” ..."
Daiga loved the lyrics of this song.
What a wonderful gift from God.
Even a wretched sinner like me is saved.
Through God's guidance, a path has opened for me, the lost.
“...I'm... wretched too.” Daiga said that, and lost consciousness.
Unrescued, the path still blocked.

The wind and rain intensified by the minute.
As if a localized typhoon had settled over the city center, the gale showed no sign of abating.
Deserted streets were blocked by layers of uprooted trees and fallen utility poles.
The Tsukiji townscape, shrouded in torrential rain, resembled a desolate ruin.
The Tokyo Central Wholesale Market that once stood here relocated to Toyosu several years ago.
The vacant lot awaiting redevelopment is slated to become the site of Japan's first casino.
Deep underground within that former market site, the Heavenly Demon Clan finished their incantation.
“It's done, Katarina...”
In the crimson darkness, Gentsu Quadar rose to his feet.
Looking around, a square magic circle flickered continuously at his feet.
The engraved, unknown characters pulsed like living creatures.
Stepping into the light, Katarina assumed a kneeling posture.
"For the long construction of this array, words of thanks cannot express my gratitude."
“No, only we of the Heavenly Demon Clan can do this. It is our mission, so to speak.”
Gentsu, now fully upright, turned to the demoness and said,

“I wish we could have shown this moment to Old Man Vow, too.”
“Those words alone will suffice. But fulfillment is near.”
Katarina licked her red lips and smiled. “Let us begin the ritual without hesitation.”
“That won't do. The obstacles still live.”
Gentsu spoke, then pressed his palms together tightly. Slowly, he began to part them.
A rainbow-colored orb appeared in his hands, its surface racing with countless tiny characters.
Reading the text, Katarina's elegant face twisted.
“Impossible! They are still alive...!”
“They're approaching this secured area from underground. And they're getting close.”
“I'll handle it. I won't let them interfere with the ritual.”
“No, leave them be. They won't get near here anyway.”
“More importantly,” Genz said, tightening his lips.
“If Richard Hadley is alive, Daiga Hououji will come here too.”
“So that boy is alive as well...!”
“You must slay Daiga. He is the only one who can hinder me.”
Then Gentsu looked up at the sky.
“He will come here. As long as she is here, he must.”
Katarina too gazed up at the crimson darkness.
To the very peak of the darkness, magic circles were stacked tenfold, twentyfold.
Midway within the tower-like barrier enveloped in light, a woman floated.
Though unconscious, her beauty and dignity remained utterly undiminished.
Gazing up at Lorraine Rosenberg, Gents smiled serenely.
“What a magnificent blessing from the gods.....”
Mentioning the name of the gods, the Heavenly Demon Host closed their eyes.
“Our long-cherished wish will be fulfilled here and now.”
Tears streamed down the Lord's cheeks, and Katarina, shoulders trembling, knelt once more within the light.

“The tactical column advances in reverse V-formation.”
Hadley shouldered the H&K 556mm triple-barreled machine gun, the Hornisse.
His helmet housed auto-aiming goggles linked to the weapon.
The others were armed with portable anti-tank rocket launchers and automatic grenade launchers.
“Move along the Oedo Line to directly beneath the Tsukiji Market ruins. Penetrate the demon horde's control zone.”
Hadley stared at his subordinates lined up at Shiodome Station.
The unit he commanded, Team Ascalon, should have a full complement of sixteen members.
However, after two battles, their forces had been drastically reduced to half their original strength.
Even so, Hadley showed no sign of hesitation, his lips pressed tightly together.

“This time, we encountered a horde of demons that even the Hououji clan couldn't defeat. What's more, the enemy is acting boldly in the heart of such a major city. This is unprecedented.”
“Major, are you really going to use it?”
Hadley nodded at his subordinate's question.
“There are no other options. We'll finish them off with the ultra-compact neutron demolition mines.”
He declared it in a resolute voice. Everyone nodded grimly.
All eyes were fixed on the circular object placed on the floor.
Looking down at the frisbee-sized device, Hadley also caught his breath.
“The damage radius is less than a kilometer. Plus, it emits no light or heat. It scatters neutrons, annihilating only living organisms. This is our only way to destroy the demon horde without destroying Tokyo.”
"Indeed, this destroys even the cell division function of living organisms. Even the demon horde should struggle to regenerate."
Hadley turned to the subordinate who had spoken.
“The problem is there's no guarantee it will be effective. And whether we can escape the neutron radiation ourselves.”
“If it means taking out that Heavenly Demon Horde in the process, I'd call that a success.”
“But if both sides die, that girl won't be saved either.”
At someone's words, a heavy, somber atmosphere settled over the group.
But Hadley's expression didn't change.
“Daiga will resent me. But my mission isn't to be loved. It's to defeat the demon horde.”
Everyone nodded. Hadley exhaled in response.
“God, forgive and protect us... Everyone, detonation codes.”
“Safety off, timer set to green, ASCALON twice.”
Everyone spoke in unison to Hadley.
Ascalon... It was the name of their unit and the sword of England's patron saint.
It was the legendary holy sword with which Saint George, the Christian hero, slew the dragon.
“For us, MNDM is truly a dragon-slaying sword,”
Hadley said, putting the Frisbee into his backpack.
“If I die, the rest of you detonate it. If you can do that, victory is ours.”
Team Ascalon entered the automatic ticket gates of the Oedo Line. It was only a few minutes later that the battle shook the underground passageway.

“...You're going, aren't you?” Sitting beside the bed, Miki repeated it over and over.
Clutching both hands, she looked down at Daiga with tear-filled eyes.
“Lorraine went out of her way to save you, and yet.....”
“That's why I'm going. This time, I'll protect her.”
Ignoring his aching body, Daiga stood up from the bed.
“Only I... can protect her.” His gaze swept over the reckless youth lying in the bed beside him.

In the empty Defense Agency medical wing, Grandpa still hadn't regained consciousness.
Daiga turned his back on Muyori and gently took Miki's shoulder.
“You probably don't understand what's going on either. But I'll explain someday.”
“But that...”
“So wait here. Sorry, but I'm counting on you to look after Grandpa.”
Daiga staggered out into the hallway. He collapsed instantly.
Agonizing pain shot through his entire body. Wounds too deep for even flowing Blood Souls to fully heal. Miki frantically pulled him upright.
“Hey, you really are...!”
“...Lorraine was the trigger.” Daiga said, recalling a distant past.
“After losing my mom and splitting from my dad, I was incredibly lonely as a kid. I cried all the time. Plus, I kept having these bloody nightmares that tormented me. But after meeting Lorraine, I stopped crying.”
“Daiga...”
"When Lorraine came to our place, she was crying too, separated from her parents. Seeing that... I wanted to make her feel safe. That's why I said, I'll find you a dad and mom to protect you."
Pushing Miki's body aside, Daiga continued.
“I wanted to get strong to protect Lorraine. Because she was there, I endured the grueling training. Because she was there, I am who I am today. That's why I absolutely wanted to protect her. But...” It was me who ended up being protected, he thought.
Daiga gripped Miki's shoulder tightly.
“Serves you right... I was shaking so bad I couldn't move.”
“.....”
“That's why I'm going. For my sake too... If I back down now, I'll be a loser for life.”
Then, behind him, he sensed movement. A raspy voice called out to Daiga as he turned.
"...You gotta keep fighting till you win... ...that's what a man does..."
With that, the old rogue stepped out of the hospital room.
Seeing his bloodless face and unsteady body, Daiga stiffened.
“Grandpa, if you move...”
“Not as much as you, you know... in more ways than one.”
The old rogue laughed and leaned his back against the wall.
“You remembered too... Guess we've got no choice but to face it now.”
Daiga stared directly into his grandfather's face.
“I didn't remember everything, Grandpa.”
Recalling the crimson nightmare, he declared.
“My mother...”
"She was killed by the demon horde. To eradicate the Hououji bloodline."
The rogue old man continued in a dry voice.
“And you, who should have grown into the successor, were attacked too. That phantom you saw when you were three... that was the memory of that time. You had forgotten it, though.”
The smile vanished from the rogue's face, and only anguish welled up from his entire being. “Misuzu... was brutally murdered in her home in Berlin.”

Reflecting his anguish in his words, the rogue spoke.
“But you, who seemed powerless as a child, activated your Blood Soul for the very first time then. Your emotions must have exploded against the one who killed your mother before your very own eyes. Without even learning how, you unconsciously unleashed your Blood Soul, transformed it into the Suzaku Blade, and destroyed the demonic horde.” Exhaling a sigh too deep for words, the old man gazed at his grandson.
“I'm sorry. If only I'd been there, I wouldn't have let you go through that.”
Indeed, the memories of that day were slowly resurfacing.
Childhood days. A familiar room. His mother's scream. Three approaching shadows.
He had wanted to do something. But he couldn't save her.
Every time he thought of it, he wanted to tear his chest open. He wanted to go back to that moment and get his precious person back.
But the helpless feeling made him clench his fists tightly.
“That demon named Gentsu said something. He said he'd met me before. And that he'd lost to me.” When Daiga said that, the rogue slowly closed his eyes.
“You've killed two of the demons who murdered your mother. But demons often travel in threes for some reason. Meaning Gents is the survivor from that time.”
“And now he's appeared before me again, leading two more demons?”
“Exactly. Probably Bolman's minions... He surely never expected to meet you again.”
“This time, I won't let him escape. I'll avenge her with my own hands.”
Gripping his fist so tightly his knuckles turned white, Daiga swore to himself.
And yet, Daiga also felt an almost strange sense of liberation.
The true nature of the nightmare that had haunted him for so very long.
Now that he finally understood it, the fear that had taken root in his heart vanished.
Trying to overcome an invisible enemy had been an immense struggle.
“Ogawa...” For so long, he hadn't known how strong he needed to become.
But now he saw. He knew the enemy he must overcome.
Daiga felt the blood soul revive within his wounded body.
“...Do as you see fit.” As if sensing Daiga's resolve, Miki quietly stepped back.
“I knew I could never match the bond between you and Lorraine...”
“Ogawa...”
“This morning, when we sank into the ground... Lorraine tried to let go of your hand, didn't she? I could never do something like that.”
Miki said, sounding resigned.
“I'm in nursing too... but I can't live up to my vows like Lorraine does.”
Daiga recalled the creed Lorraine had spoken.
“I shall dedicate myself to the happiness of those entrusted to my care.”
It was the oath Lorraine cherished, the one she'd made Daiga memorize too.
Miki remembered her own nursing pledge and wiped away her tears.
“Sorry for being so selfish. I just wanted to mess with you guys.”
“When I get home...”
“But I was kinda happy back then. You called me by my name.”
Miki looked up at Daiga and smiled softly.

“I've been wanting you to call me by my name for a while now.”
“...Oh, I don't remember it, man.”
“You idiot, don't be so honest.” Miki said, pushing Daiga's back.
He gave her a deep, reckless nod in return.
“Hurry up and go... Lorraine's waiting... And then...”
“Make sure you come back, both you and Lorraine.”
At his grandfather's words, Daiga steadied his breathing. He gathered his Blood Soul, swelling it hotly, and sent it coursing through his limbs. His body, brimming with fighting spirit, grew thicker than usual.
It was at that moment the urgent alarm sounded.

The Defense Agency headquarters in Ichigaya housed the Joint Front Headquarters.
Monitors lining the walls received footage from Team Ascalon.
Staring into the darkness of the underground passage, Reiko and the Self-Defense Forces personnel were speechless.

“When did this thing...?” Hadley, walking along the Oedo Line tracks, also stopped in his tracks. A foul-smelling tree trunk had smashed through the ceiling, its roots spreading to block the subway tunnel.
The rhizome, easily three meters in diameter, was covered in something resembling red lines. Its wet surface glowed eerily, pulsing rhythmically from time to time.
“Looks like it's pumping something from underground further ahead.”
“Richard, you hear that? That thing connects to the zone controlled by the demon horde...” Having said that, Reiko froze at the transmitted footage.
The red pus swelled before her eyes, transforming into several enormous masses of flesh.
Their size surpassed a person's height, multiplying to ten, twenty.
Soon limbs sprouted fully, morphing into hideous human-like creatures.
“Open fire on each target!”
Major Hadley's command sent M27 automatic rifles blazing in unison.
.556mm freeze rounds slammed mercilessly into the flesh masses.
Yet the grotesque human misfits calmly extended their left arms forward.
In their hands, they generated inverted teardrop-shaped barriers that effortlessly deflected the bullets.
“Freeze bullets won't work! Grenade!” The Major synchronized his breath with his subordinate and hurled the grenade from his chest to the root.
But faster than the explosion, a physical form darted out from within the mass of flesh.
It swung the blade clenched in its right hand, cleaving the grenade mid-air.
Dodging the blast, Hadley recognized the true form of the monstrosity that had appeared.
“The Magyar Guard of Saint King István...” Hadley murmured the name of Hungary's first king. Once, the Magyars of Hungary ravaged all of Europe, possessing an invincible cavalry corps so formidable they were called the Unconquered Magyars.
But it was Saint Istvan, who ascended the throne in the year 1000, who, concerned by Hungary's repeated invasions, sought to end that history by thoroughly converting the nation to Christianity.
Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Such is the teaching of the Holy King.
His right hand remains enshrined as a mummy in the great cathedral of the capital, Budapest. Yet the knights appearing before them hardly seemed like guardians of the clergy. Their teeth chattered, their red eyes gleaming with madness.
Clad in armor and coats, they raised their sabers.
“Take cover! Avoid close combat! Engage them individually!”
Hadley's order rang out as countless lines of fire met the Magyar Guard.
But thrusting their shields forward, the knights charged.
The gunfire proved ineffective. Realizing this, the Major threw a grenade.
Flash and explosion. Immediately after, a 40mm grenade detonated at point-blank range.
But the specter easily leapt over the barrier and lunged at Team Ascalon.
“Keep your distance! Retreat! Retreat!”
The Major rammed his M27 automatic rifle into the knight's back of the head.
The bayonet attached to the muzzle sank deep into the flesh.
But the knight swung his arm, hurling the Major against the wall with terrifying brute strength. At that instant, the feed from the subway cut out.

“Richard! Respond! Richard!”
“Ascalon Leader! Switch to the emergency line...”
Self-Defense Force personnel wrestled with the control panel. But no voice came through.
Reiko clenched both fists and slowly rose from her seat.
“Switch to the backup line immediately! I'm going to...”
“...go get me, right?”
A strangely hot hand shook Reiko's shoulder as she started to speak.
Turning around, she found a boy covered in wounds standing before her.
“The car... Get it out...” Daiga said this, then looked up at the monitors that had gone completely dark.
“...I guess I have to go.” Daiga's complexion was still deathly pale, the flesh on his cheeks sunken and gaunt.
Even so, Reiko gasped as she sensed the blood soul emanating from the Great Fang.
“Richard took the MNDM... the micro-neutralizer detonation mine.”
“I figured as much. He planned to blow them up even if Lorraine was there?”
“We've never faced a situation like this before.” Reiko spun her words desperately.
"That the Heavenly Demon Horde would move so openly... And they're not even trying to hide their actions anymore. They must have some grand purpose. We have no choice but to stop them, whatever it takes."
“But sacrificing Lorraine...”
“I thought it was unavoidable too, but...” Reiko met Daiga's furious gaze head-on.
“Gents said he'd make Lorraine his wife. Maybe she was targeted as something more than just an Adaptive Body. Our predictions were betrayed in the worst way...”
That was exactly what Daiga had been thinking too.
“Daiga...”
The relentless nature shown by Vow near-death.
The bitter regret of Katarina, lamenting Vow’s fate.
Just as Reiko said – there had to be some greater purpose.
“Either way, I'm going to rescue Lorraine.” Daiga said, pulling Reiko close.
“...Right now, it's just me. The only one who can cut through the demon horde, the only one who can save Lorraine.”
“Daiga...”
“But whether I can win is another matter. If I lose, the entire world will hate me. That's fine. Because by then, I won't be in this world anymore.”
Daiga deliberately forgot the responsibility weighing on his shoulders.
Then, gripping Daiga's arm, Reiko finally squeezed out her voice.
“I won't hold it against you... I won't...”
“Reiko...”
“I won't hold it against you... Even if you lose...” And regaining her sharp gaze, she looked up at Daiga.
“Fine. I'll play along in this game of yours.”
“I'm sorry.”
Nodding, Daiga Hoouji stepped onto the battlefield.

Descending the slope of Sotobori Street, the Type 17 Light Armored Vehicle headed toward Akasaka. Reiko, driving the Ground Self-Defense Force vehicle, was fed up with the pounding downpour.

“What the hell do you mean, go to Hamarikyu?!”

“It means we attack via a different route than Hadley and the others!”

Daiga in the passenger seat shouted, comparing several maps.

"Hamarikyu Park is adjacent to the former Tsukiji Market site! Both drainage facilities were connected underground!"

As they passed the side of the Prime Minister's residence, Daiga tossed the map to the back seat.

“If the enemy's blocked the subway, that's the only way to get to the underground site... Hey! Drive a little more carefully!”

“I'm doing the best I can! Besides...”

Reiko turned the steering wheel sharply, driving the light armored vehicle forward.

“There aren't any decent roads left!”

Indeed, numerous streets have been lined with trees that had been toppled by wind and rain. At least the road was clear of other cars due to traffic restrictions.

Splashing water, the vehicle passed under the elevated tracks of the JR Yamanote Line.

"Keep going right! Hopefully the demon hordes aren't on alert... ..."

Just as Daiga began to speak, a flash of lightning erupted nearby.

But it wasn't a lightning bolt. It was a red, swollen fireball.

And it was trailing flames, diving straight toward Daiga's vehicle.

“Just our luck!”

Reiko twisted the steering wheel and slammed her foot on the accelerator.

The fireball that struck blew away the asphalt, sending the light armored vehicle bouncing violently. The fireball then rebounded off the ground and shot back into the air.

Shaking off the pursuing living fireball, the vehicle crashed through the main gate of Hama-rikyu Gardens.

“Hold on tight!” Veering off the vehicle path, Reiko drove the vehicle into the pine grove

Hamarikyu Park was originally used as a falconry ground for the Tokugawa shogunate - later, it was expanded as a palace to entertain court nobles visiting from Kyoto, but Reiko trampled its magnificent gardens, scraping away the beautiful lawns as she fled.

“What skills! You could race in the Paris-Dakar Rally!”

“You know the way! Where now?!”

As Reiko shouted, she noticed a fireball approaching head-on.

She frantically turned the wheel left, but the fireball followed.

The fireball overtook the light armored vehicle and slammed into its hood.

Then the fireball transformed into the figure of a woman with long, disheveled hair.

“It's you, Katarina!” As Daiga's voice rang out, the demonic woman cloaked in crimson flames turned around.

Flying through the air, Katarina kicked the light armored vehicle with her long legs.

The vehicle lurched forward, black smoke billowing from the crushed hood.

Without slowing, the car plunged into the pond known as the Koshin-do Duck Pond.
“It’s too late for you to show up now.” Katarina landed calmly at the pond's edge, showering the sinking vehicle with scornful laughter.
“Pulling the ritual off was surprisingly easy, Daiga Hououji.” But suddenly, the roof of the light armored vehicle left on the water's surface began to bulge unnaturally.
Pressure built up inside, and the armor plates split apart explosively.
What burst out from within was a Suzaku blade glowing bright red.
“The final showdown begins now!”
Daiga, holding Reiko in his left arm, leapt from the gaping hole into the sky.
Soaring upward on Seiryu’s wings, he gripped the Phoenix Blade in his right hand.
Enveloped in trailing blue light, Daiga soared triumphantly above Katarina.
“You stubborn bastard!” Katarina also readied her arms on both sides, timing her move for when the two landed.
“Burn until you're consumed by ‘Vow's Revenge’!”
Fireballs materialized from nothingness, swarming toward Daiga and Reiko.
Oga swiftly pushed Reiko away and gripped the Phoenix Blade with both hands.
“I'm sick of seeing your tricks!”
He flashed the extended blades horizontally and vertically, slicing the fireballs away.
To Reiko, shielding him from behind, Daiga shouted. “Hurry! Find the entrance to the underground!”
Without even drawing her Beretta, Reiko ran toward the hut hidden in the thicket.
The pump house regulating the pond's water level was the very entrance to the underground drainage facility.
But Katarina, sensing Reiko's move, abruptly changed her objective.
“I won't let you go!” Catarina swung both arms, unleashing an endless barrage of fireballs.
Daiga spun the Suzaku Blade like a windmill, slicing through the flames aimed at Reiko.
But if this continued, they'd be pinned down, unable to move.
“Then I'll blast it away with this!” Daiga released his Blood Soul and soared skyward once more on the Azure Dragon's Wings.
The Blood Soul, transformed into a blue flash, lifted Daiga upward like a gale.
That momentum collided with the fireball, forming a wall of wind that blocked the attack.
“Daiga, you bastard!” Seiryu's wings swept the fireball, flinging it back toward Catarina.
Without pause, Daiga closed in on the startled sorceress. “We've fought twice! I know your moves!”
Daiga latched onto Katarina and forcibly dragged her into the pond.
Finish her off in the water where fire has no effect. That was Daiga's plan. But...
Daiga's body sensed something amiss.
The feeling of passing through an invisible wall. His Blood Soul, sensing danger, boiled.
An unpleasant flicker assaulted his mind and body, dizziness and nausea rising.
What the hell is this pond? Daiga doubted his own eyes.
The cold pond was filled with clear, blue water.

And it was deep and wide. Rock shelves lined the bottom here and there, and seaweed swayed. Seeing the schools of fish swimming overhead, Taiga finally realized.
This is the sea. Tokyo Bay? No way... that couldn't be.
At that moment, Katarina broke free from her bonds and sent out her thoughts.
“How foolish, Daiga Hououji.”
“You thought my legacy, the Curse Gate, was fire, and lured me into the water. But I saw you coming and had already prepared my domain of suppression.”
A crimson tattoo appeared on Katarina's forehead, blazing fiercely.
And Daiga realized he'd fallen into a trap.
The flow of his Blood Soul slowed, while the pressure he felt from Katarina intensified.
This Domain of Suppresion was an environment where a Demon's power could be fully unleashed.
“Besides, an enemy's strength is best countered after truly seeing through it”
Katarina moved her entire body like a spring, smoothly gliding down toward the water's depths. The demoness, maintaining her distance, let her hair drift in the water and smiled defiantly.
“My legacy curse gate is called Eroismo's Violent Tremor. My homeland, the Azores islands, are the Atlantic's sole volcanic archipelago. Just as those volcanoes shake the earth, I too make everything tremble. In other words...”
The sorceress flickered her flame tattoos and licked her lips. “I can fight underwater too.”
Daiga endured the suffocating pressure as he gauged his distance from the sorceress.
Katarina didn't fight by burning everything.
She made everything vibrate at the molecular level, instantly generating thermal energy.
This bitch is like a microwave.
Fighting here wasn't wise. Daiga aimed for the surface, trying to escape the domain.
But Katarina's speed in pursuit surpassed any sea creature.
“Let me teach you one more thing, Daiga - the Azores are also a breeding ground for whales. I studied their ecology at university. The underwater realm is where I excel most!” Ripples spread through the water from the approaching Katarina.
The moment they engulfed Oga's body, a violent tremor shook his eardrums.
The sonic waves, reminiscent of whale cries, seemed to pierce straight into his brain.
An even more intense vortex became a blade of water, slicing and dicing Daiga's skin.
Without thinking, Daiga expelled the oxygen stored in his mouth with a gasp.
“Want air, Daiga? Want to return to land? To allow that would be an insult to the memory of the fallen Vow.”
Daiga still possessed enough Blood Soul to deliver one final strike.
But underwater, Katarina moved with dolphin-like agility.
Daiga thought - If I can't stop those movements, I have no chance of winning.
Yet my breath won't last, and my consciousness is fading fast. Riding the current, fresh blood gushes forth. It spreads like a crimson smoke screen, obscuring his body.
“Have you given up... or do you think your own blood hides you?””
Katalina sneered at the defenseless Daiga.
“It's useless, Daiga. Just as whales and dolphins exchange calls to locate each other, I know your position too, through echolocation. You cannot escape now.”

Katarina violently whipped her lower body, charging forward through the water.
“I see right through your movements!”
But Daiga focused solely on drawing the demoness closer, waiting for his moment.
And the moment he closed the distance, his eyes snapped open.
“Then can you read the flow of my Blood Soul too?” He screamed inside his mind, transforming the energy released from his limbs into a black flash.
“This is...!”
The black flash that streaked through the water was the power forming Genbu's shield.
That flash formed a square barrier, directly absorbing Katarina's sonic wave.
The black barrier vibrated with a crackling sound. But the sonic wave was swallowed by the black wall. Furthermore, Genbu's barrier rumbled underwater, unleashing a heavy shockwave.
The sound waves amplified and rebounded toward Katarina.
“D-dammit.....!” It was too late to flee.
Enveloped by her own sound waves, Katarina let out a scream.
Rainbow-colored bodily fluid spurted from her ears as she tried to cover them.
“Da… Daigaaah!” Ignoring the demoness, Daiga burst forcefully from the water's surface. He broke free from the Suppressed Domain, revived his Blood Soul, and drew air deep into his lungs.
“Seems my voice grates on your ears, Katarina!”
Diving downward, Daiga conjured phoenix blades in both hands.
“I won't hear a thing now!”
Daiga swung the crimson blades with all his might, aiming for the water's surface.
Red lightning erupted from the blades.
The lightning bolt shot straight through the water, striking the agonized Katarina squarely in the forehead.
“Lord Gents! This boy... he’s strong...!”
Her dying thoughts were drowned out by the thunderous roar.
From the towering spray of water, Daiga descended to the ground with unhurried grace.
White and black steam rose from the water surface scorched by Daiga’s strike.
Was this black gas the true form of the Demon, having lost its host?
Before he could ponder further, Daiga, exhausted, collapsed to his knees in the mud.
“Only one... remains...” He could feel himself completely drained.
Reiko hurriedly rushed over to him.
“I found the entrance. Just one more push.”
“...Yeah, that last push is what counts.” Daiga leaned his body against Reiko, who offered her shoulder.
“Let's hurry... If we don't make it in time, it'll all be for nothing...” Daiga looked down at his own hand, still glowing faintly red.
There was no fear, no stiffness left. His Blood Soul burned hot.
Reiko's gaze softened slightly.
Nodding, the two descended into the underground battlefield.

Inside the Oedo Line, bloody hand-to-hand combat still raged.
Major Hadley, Holniss triple machine gun slung at his waist, shouted.
“This is getting us nowhere!”
The eerie knights showed no sign of wavering resolve.
His men were growing restless against these fiends immune to freezing bullets.
“Major, let's retreat!” One shouted, pointing back toward the tunnel they had come from.
“Lure them all the way back, then blow up the tunnel and bury them alive!”
“There's no time to retreat. If we're going to blow it up, it has to be here.”
“You still intend to break through here? Give up and retreat!”
“That would mean we couldn't defeat the demon horde.”
Hadley, who had started to speak, fixed his gaze deep into the darkness.
Knights, their advance halted by gunfire, raised their sabers in a cry of defiance.
Behind them, the eerie rhizome that had spawned the knights pulsed.
Watching the pulse of life surge from the underground into the occupied territory...
Behind them, the eerie rhizome that spawned the knights pulsed.
“Bring the demolition gear! Now!”
“What are you doing? That won't work on those knights!”
“It doesn't matter. And bring the remaining grenade launchers and anti-tank rockets too.”
His subordinates started to protest, “You can't be serious...” but then realized. They dashed toward the rear. “We'll unleash every ounce of firepower! Leave it to us!”
Nodding to his charging men, the Major's voice cracked.
“Hold out two more minutes! White phosphorus grenades! Blind them!”
The battle of machine guns and sabers raged on, making the underground darkness roar violently.

Completed in 1933, Tsukiji Market served as Tokyo's kitchen for many years.
It was a massive market handling over 2,000 tons of seafood and 1,000 tons of produce daily. But the market relocated to Toyosu, and the former site remains in the midst of redevelopment. The place Daiga and the others reached was the underground drainage facility beneath that vast site.
But when Daiga opened the door, he witnessed a horrifying, bizarre erosion.
“What the hell is this...”
Where the drainage facility should have been, a massive cavern spread out.
The walls were covered in dark red pus, and the passageway glistened with a slimy, fishy sheen.
The cavern extended in the direction where Tokyo Bay should have been.
As they stepped into the cavern, Reiko squeezed out a dry voice.
“This... is a Suppressed Domain... Probably Gentsu's...”
But the pressure here was entirely different from the areas controlled by Vow and Katarina. Far from merely slowing movement, an overwhelming weight descended that threatened to halt thought itself.
Reiko's legs had already frozen in place before this overwhelming presence.

Even so, Daiga forged his Blood Soul, channeled it through his body, and repelled the encroaching pressure. His limbs moved. He could unleash his blood soul. He was certain he could fight like this.
Then, sensing the approaching threat, Daiga quietly assumed a fighting stance.
“Stay back, Reiko.”
Simultaneously with his voice, bubbling pus violently erupted.
Emerging from within were knights in armor, sabers in hand.
“No time to mess around!”
The knights let out a deafening roar and lunged at Daiga.
Daiga's blade met them at a speed too fast for the eye to follow.
Knights sliced by the crimson afterimage split clean in two and crashed to the ground.
Reiko had no time to provide backup as they melted away, dripping and dissolving.
“Hurry! This way!” Daiga grabbed Reiko's hand and sprinted through the crimson-black cavern. They trampled over pus and root stems, racing down a gentle slope.
Soon, the cavern opened into a vast spherical space - one hundred meters wide, sixty meters high to the ceiling.
A contaminated zone, red-black and filthy, as large as the Tokyo Dome.
From its center, toward the ceiling, something luminous lay in layers upon layers, flickering unknown characters. Magic circles. And in their midst...
“Lorraine!”
The girl lying down appeared, glowing pale blue.
Her face, with its flowing golden hair, still held life.
She was here. And she was still alive.
That fact alone slightly eased Daiga's mind.
But Lorraine descended silently, caught in the arms of the man waiting on the ground.
Daiga's fighting spirit surged at the sight of the familiar long coat.
A pressure-like presence overflowed from behind him, reviving the fear of defeat.
“Gents Quadar.” Daiga squeezed out the words, staring at the man's withered right hand.
The fingers that had halted the Phoenix Blade—the very fingers he himself had called the hand of a king. Gentsu embraced Lorraine's shoulder with that hand and glanced at Daiga, frozen in place.
“I shan't praise you for making it this far...” The Demon spoke, holding Lorraine's body suspended in midair. “...but I shall accept your gift: the debt for burying Vow and Katarina. I find it curious, the bond between you and Lorraine.”
Daiga closed the distance with shuffling steps, his gaze fixed on Gents.
“Despite you treating humans like vermin, the bonds between you demons seem surprisingly strong.”
“Humans are no different. Don't they eat other animals to survive?” Gentsu said, looking down at his own body. “And we demons borrow those human bodies. It's only natural we resemble them.”
“So you're parasites, then?”
“Call us hosts. We don't choose just any human. We only select those with sufficient potential to fully amplify our demonic nature and abilities.”
With Lorraine floating behind him, the demon faced the Great Fang.

“We are not as cruel creatures as humans imagine. We are merely desperate to survive.”
“You dragged countless innocent humans into this. What do you want to achieve by going this far?”
“To return. To the far beyond.” Gentsu confessed with surprising simplicity.
“We are drifters. We washed ashore here from a place far, far away. We wish to end our wandering and return to that distant place. That is our deepest longing.”
“What is this ‘distant place’? Another dimension? Or another planet?”
“It’s not something that can be described with words.”
“Then go back on your own. No need to drag Lorraine into this.”
As Daiga pressed closer, Gentsu finally shifted his expression.
He stretched his lips into a smile, his face oddly cool as he looked at Oga.
“Still don't you see? This girl wasn't dragged into this.”
“You don't mean...” Before Daiga could finish, Gentsu's arm moved swiftly.
Though he pressed forward to confront him, Daiga could not respond.
But Gentsu's arm did not reach for him—it stretched toward Lorraine's back.
“Stop it!” Daiga stared dumbstruck as Lorraine's clothes were torn apart.
His gaze froze on the exposed white skin.
With decayed fingertips, Gents stroked Lorraine's back and closed his eyes.
“Yes, she wasn't dragged into this... she was summoned.”

“Give me the C4.” Major Hadley received the rectangular plastic explosive C4.
With practiced hands, he inserted the ignition detonator and lit the fuse.
He sprang up from behind the collapsed rubble.
“Suppressive fire!” Simultaneously, the entire Team Ascalon unleashed their automatic rifles. Ignoring their dwindling ammunition, they showered the Magyar Guard with a hail of bullets.
As the screaming mass of flesh charged forward, the Major clutched the ignited C4.
“It's an obvious energy source!”
The thrown C4 arced over the heads of the Magyars.
It rolled to rest beside the pulsing, crimson-black rhizome in the rear. The Major bellowed. “Get down!”
The blast's shockwave, trapped within the underground tunnel, compressed and detonated.
The shockwave hurled them back, burying the knights of flesh beneath the rubble.
The rhizome was torn apart, its fragile interior exposed.
Hadley sprang to his feet, already shouldering a small cylinder.
“It's been since the Pyongyang offensive that things got this hectic!”
M82E3 Portable Anti-Tank Missile - this disposable weapon, renowned for its immense destructive power, charged into the root stem's tear.
The warhead exploded, spewing a massive blast of flame.
The root stem was torn to shreds, and the flames spread to the other roots.
“Major, look at that!” One of his subordinates pointed into the darkness.
The knights who endured that massive explosion were already crawling out from beneath the rubble - but they writhed in agony, their roots burning and dissolving.

Cheers erupted, and Hadley wiped his sweat. He then glared at his wristwatch.
“We're twenty minutes behind schedule. No matter what happens from here on, don't stop.” Before he finished speaking, his subordinates had already climbed over the debris and resumed their advance.
Only the communications officer turned, startled by the voice from his portable communicator. “Major, communication with the frontline headquarters is restored! Others have breached alongside us!”
“Don't tell me it's Daiga.”
“It is.” With that reply, Hadley too dashed into the darkness below.

“You should already know this tattoo.” Gents said, baring Lorraine's skin.
A small tattoo stood out clearly on her torn back.
Reiko lost her voice at the sight of the tattooed woman with iridescent hair flowing behind her.
She writhed her magnificent naked body and offered Gents a lascivious smile.
“This is what the demonic horde sought for twelve thousand years. Our salvation.”
“What...?”
“And I have earned the right to take this girl as my wife.”
As he spoke, Gentsu twisted and interlocked his fingers in a strange manner.
A muffled, resonant sound escaped his lips—an unknown language.
Then, glowing letters burst forth from Gentsu's mouth.
Forming lines, they danced into the sky—the same characters that were etched into the magic circles. Glowing crimson and black, they swirled, and the surrounding rhizomes began to rumble loudly.
“Wh-what is this?!”
Rhizomes stretching everywhere writhed like giant serpents, and Reiko dropped to her knees. The rhizomes gathered toward the magic circle reaching the ceiling, splitting into countless fragments.
Enveloping Gentsu, the roots transformed into a colossal structure.
A tower crowned with a dome stood majestically at its center, flanked by spires on either side. Gazing up at it, Gentsu suddenly closed his eyes.
“I used to be a cameraman for Hungarian National Television.”
As he spoke with a hint of nostalgia, the structure began to flicker crimson and black.
“I covered ethnic conflicts across Europe, filming the brutal massacres that took place there.”
“So what?”
“But no matter how horrific the scenes I captured, I felt no hesitation. This was reality. I had to show the world this tragedy... Back then, I was burning with a sense of mission.” Ignoring Daiga, Gents opened his eyes.
“But the station refused to air my footage. They deemed it too brutal. That's when I realized: people don't want to see cruel reality... They crave happy illusions, even if they're just mirages.” Gents continued speaking to Daiga, who stood guard.
“In my despair, I thought of my homeland's hero, István. A great leader guides the people by showing them an ideal. But that ideal, too, is nothing more than a happy

illusion. So I too wanted to abandon reality and manipulate illusions like István did. That desire...” Gents paused mid-sentence and raised his mummified, withered hand.

“Made me into a host body. This building here is St. Stephen's Basilica in Budapest... And this right hand is none other than Istvan's own right hand, which was preserved within the cathedral.” Gents smiled with satisfaction and surveyed his surroundings.

“Having become a Demon, I possess the same power as the Holy King. And if I marry Lorraine, I shall surpass Istvan.”

The perfectly recreated building illuminated Lorraine, who slept bathed in crimson light.

Gents gazed at the unconscious girl as if stroking her.

“This is the ritual space for that purpose. Marriage is permitted only to the Heavenly Demon Clan.”

“Lorraine wouldn't like this place... or you either.”

“It matters not. Once we are united, the gate to the beyond will open.”

“To open the gate, do you need Lorraine and the tattoo?”

When Daiga asked, the demon flicked the hem of his coat.

“No. This one is the gate itself. And I am the key.”

“Why did that tattoo appear? Was it your doing?!”

“She was chosen. For the tattoo.”

The Celestial Demon gently kissed the tattoo on Lorraine’s skin.

With love, again and again, he ran his wet tongue over her.

Just as Daiga's fury was about to explode, Gentsu lifted his face.

“And now, awaken.” Suddenly, the crimson-black light intensified, enveloping Lorraine's body. Her clothes became transparent, then vanished without a trace.

Now floating in the air was Lorraine's naked form, completely unclothed.

Beautiful enough to steal one's soul, divine enough to make one bow down.

But on her back, the tattoo of a woman began to stir.

She shook her iridescent hair and sent a quiet smile to Daiga.

The movement as she stretched her limbs was clearly one of joy, celebrating her newfound freedom.

“Oh, Your Majesty...” Gents said. “How long we have waited for this moment...”

Who was he referring to as “Your Majesty”? Daiga stared in astonishment.

The tattoo that had seemed no larger than a small birthmark had grown to the size of a palm. rowing larger, growing clearer... The sharp smile even carried an air of authority. Then, suddenly, Gents spread his arms wide.

“Then I too shall raise a celebratory cup and become a body worthy of a bride.”

The moment the demonic horde spoke, the space above warped violently.

From the depths of that twisted spacetime, dozens of human figures surfaced.

Families with children, couples, salarymen—all manner of people.

These ordinary folk showed no signs of consciousness. Why were these people here...

Then, Daiga remembered. The train derailment that had left countless people missing.

And then he realized, roaring at Gentsu.

“Stop! Those people...!”

But it was already too late.
The people floating in the sky were swept up into a pitch-black tornado.
One by one, the bodies swallowed by the vortex exploded, bursting apart in a gruesome display. Flesh and bone shattered into millimeter-sized fragments, like bloody fireworks.
“What have you done...!” Reiko covered her mouth, but her terror didn't end there.
Slowly, Gentsu opened the front of his long coat.
The exposed skin of the demonic horde sent a chill through Daiga.
On Gentsu's chest were countless sucker-like appendages lined up.
Each sucker sprouted tiny fangs and breathed. The suckers opened their mouths wide, chewing and swallowing the splattered flesh and blood with cries of delight.
“Drink! Devour, my flesh!”Gentsu roared with laughter at the showering human remains.
“Grant me flesh to bind in covenant! With this celebratory toast!”
The suction cups noisily gulped down the whirlwind of flesh and blood.
Gulp... gulp... So many people were swallowed into the Demon in the blink of an eye.
Then, Gentsu's own body began to transform.
His stature grew taller, his shoulders bulged with muscle, and his limbs swelled robustly.
His long coat ripped with a loud tear as Gents' height surpassed two meters.
“This is no illusion, Daiga.” The demonic horde looked down upon Oba, his faces radiating delight. “To bind with Lorraine and open the Gate of Return, a body of this magnitude is necessary.”
The enlarged sucker fangs clicked menacingly at Lorraine, who floated before it.
Daiga looked up at Gentsu, now transformed into a giant, a peak of human body.
“...I won't say anything grand like saving humanity.”
Then, he channeled the Blood Soul into his fists. His burning, boiling Blood Soul.
“But I won't forgive you... How many innocent souls have you slaughtered?!”
Roaring, the Great Fang leapt toward Gentsu.
A reckless charge. The demon saw it and let out a resounding, maniacal laugh.
“The harsh reality must be bitter, Daiga Hououji!” From Gentsu's screaming hand, the jet-black saber that had slain the rogue streaked forward.
Its blade had grown to match the giant's frame.
Speed, reach... Daiga should have been cut down first, without question.
Yet it was Gentsu who spurted rainbow-colored blood.
“You bastard!” Gentsu's saber sliced through empty air, striking the ground in vain.
Daiga had evaded that strike with a slight shift of his body.
Then, diving into the demon horde's chest, he thrust the tip of his blade into its throat.
“A saber's a blade you cut with your weight behind it. I knew you'd come from high.”
Daiga, pushing the blade in, was undeniably possessed by rage - but he also had the composure to make that fury appear merely like a runaway beast.
“And you've grown a full size larger. I thought you'd swing for a massive, destructive blow.” A strike wielded by that colossal frame would indeed be fatal.
But by underestimating the Great Fang, it created an opening, one he could exploit.
Besides, Daiga had already witnessed the speed of Gentsu's blade.
He read his thoughts, baited him, knew his speed, and evaded his trajectory.

Daiga’s counterattack should have been a fatal blow, a killing strike to send his opponent to death in one blow. But...
“Against a human, you might have won. But I am a Heavenly Demon.”
Gentsu gripped the blade piercing his own throat.
He looked down at the stunned Daiga and effortlessly pulled out the Suzaku blade.
“With your strength alone, you cannot defeat me.”
In that instant, Daiga saw countless black sabers assaulting him.
“Daiga!”
Heavily weighted blades seemed to pierce his face, arms, and abdomen.
He couldn't tell if the scream he heard was Reiko's.
When he came to, Daiga had been blown back twenty meters from the Demon.
His body was hacked to pieces, countless bones broken, sinking into a sea of his own blood.
“Not enough.” Gentsu tilted his head, saber in hand.
“This level of resistance is hardly sufficient to thwart the demon horde's long-held ambition.” With that, the demon turned to face Lorraine.
But in the corner of his vision, Daiga rose calmly to his feet.
"..... Then stop holding back, Gentsu."
Daiga once again let the Blood Soul flow through his entire body.
The bleeding stopped, the pain vanished, and his fighting spirit revived.
“That last strike alone wasn't enough to kill me. If this is the power of the Heavenly Demon Clan... It seems I might have a chance to win.”
Even as he said this, Daiga couldn't shake the chill.
It was the Demon Clan after all. Human methods were useless against them; they wielded swords beyond human skill.
Even so, he felt no fear. He had no intention of dying until he saved Lorraine.
Sensing Daiga's resolve, the Demon raised his saber once more.
“It seems you wish to see the illusions I weave once more.”
“Go ahead. I'm not the same as I was this morning.”
Daiga recalled the crimson nightmare, and the days I tried to grow stronger.
“...I won't see you in my nightmares anymore.”
“How shallow. You should know what it was you truly feared.”
Gentsu smiled with a look of pity. “You fear the death of others more than your own.”
Suddenly, a white light swirled around Daiga.
As a shimmering figure appeared within the light, Daiga's entire body stiffened.
“You... you're... M-Mom...” The woman with flowing long hair, her beautiful face contorted, seemed to be fleeing from something.
Daiga couldn't move a finger, frozen solid in place.
When the black shadow seized the woman's shoulder and tore flesh from bone, Daiga looked away. “You haven't overcome your past. And just like your mother, you're afraid of losing this girl.”
Daiga desperately fought against his stiffened body.
Seeing the boy freeze again, Reiko raised her voice.
“Daiga, your mother is dead! What you're seeing now is fake!”

Daiga knew that too. But his body wouldn't budge an inch.
It wasn't the demon that had been tormenting him in his nightmares. It was his mother's death. And now, the tragedy was about to repeat itself.
Unable to bear the grief of losing Lorraine, his heart began to shatter.
Before the phantom, the Heavenly Demon turned their backs on the bloodied and sweating Daiga. "It's over, boy. Then now is the time....."
The demon spread his arms wide, looming over the sleeping Lorraine.
The suction cups all over their bodies pulsed open and closed repeatedly.
Was this the way demons mated? Was this the ritual to open the gate?
Even trying to stop it, Daiga couldn't move. Reiko stood frozen in despair.
Just as everything seemed about to end… "Duck, Reiko!"
Simultaneously with someone's shout, the cathedral wall blew apart with a loud crash.
Startled by the sudden roar, Daiga only managed to turn his gaze.
Piercing through the rhizome and erupting in a spectacular explosion was an anti-tank rocket. Reiko cried out involuntarily to the group that had rushed over.
She saw Hadley standing at the head of Team Ascalon.
The commander, having entered Gents's controlled territory, immediately gave the order.
"Use dust destruction warheads. Burn everything to the ground."
The Mannerheim 106mm special recoilless rifle fired at the tangled roots.
The warhead contained compressed aluminum powder and multiple chemical agents.
Upon impact, its contents dispersed into the air, instantly igniting into a terrifying inferno.
"Wait, Richard, not yet...!" But Reiko's scream was drowned out by the heat exceeding 1000 degrees Celsius.
The shockwave from the ultra-compact fuel-air explosive warhead sent shockwaves through the cathedral, causing it to begin collapsing.
And the flames engulfed not only the demon horde, but also Daiga and Lorraine.
"Don't try any tricks!" Gents swung one hand, and the rhizomes stirred once more to hold the cathedral steady.
Hadley shouted to his men, determined to prevent that. "The bombardment is effective! Reload next round, prepare to fire!"
"Wait, Richard!" Reiko finally ran to Hadley's side.
"Daiga and Lorraine are here too! They'll all die!"
At her words, Hadley noticed the frozen boy and the sleeping girl.
His eyes understood everything. But the commander bit his lip and said to Reiko.
"If we keep attacking, we can blow this place to smithereens. We can win."
Hadley flung his gas mask aside and looked down at Reiko.
The light in his eyes held more than mere fighting spirit.
"I don't need your cheap sympathy. If saving the world means sacrificing two lives, there's only one path to take." Even to Reiko, it sounded like the logical choice.
But slowly shaking her head, she told Hadley.
"No... You're the one being reckless, Richard."
"What? What do you mean..."
"What if the fight against the demon horde continues even after they're dead?!"

Hadley's expression hardened at Reiko's question.
Grasping both shoulders, Reiko squeezed out another voice.
“Only Daiga can fight the demon... And Daiga needs...”
Lorraine.
Hadley couldn't deny Reiko's words.
And as the silence froze, the cathedral shook violently.
Gents let out a triumphant roar. “It seems they've accepted it—their defeat.”
Gents laughed, turning back to Daiga. “And you, sir, can't even get your revenge.”
Daiga still couldn't break free from the illusion. But at the demon horde's words, Daiga finally clenched his fists. “For revenge... Do you think that's why I came here...?”
Daiga looked up at Lorraine's naked body and spoke.
Even unconscious, her tattoo crawling across her skin, Lorraine remained unchanged.
Her apron while cooking. Her sleeping face, dreaming happily.
That moment when she stopped crying, believing in his promise to protect her.
Only her smile came to mind. And when she protected Daiga too...
“I'm not fighting for a dead woman...” Daiga shouted, as if carving the words into himself. “...I'm fighting for a living woman!”
His cry resonated through the cathedral like the tolling of bells.
Yet Lorraine remained suspended, as if merely sleeping.
Gentsu sneered at the cry and thrust his saber at Daiga.
“It's useless. This girl is destined for me alone.....”
But at that moment... Lorraine's lips moved slightly.
Like tiny petals, they murmured someone's name.
Daiga recognized the name. He clenched both fists. Slowly, Lorraine's eyelids began to open. The awakened girl noticed Daiga, covered in blood.
“Dai-chan...!” Then she turned her gaze to Daiga's mother, struggling within the aurora.

The only thing she couldn't see was the tattoo writhing on her own back.
“Sorry... I saw you naked...” Daiga forced a smile at Lorraine, suppressing his pain.
Still, he had seen her again. They had spoken.
Joy poured new strength into Daiga's body.
“But... you're incredibly beautiful...”
Lorraine merely covered herself with both hands at his words.
Like Botticelli's Birth of Venus. And as always, she smiled at Ōga.
“Dai-chan... you kept apologizing in your sleep... the whole time.”
Did she know? The words Daiga had repeated in his nightmare?
Forgive me... Forgive me...
Looking back now, it wasn't the demon horde—he was apologizing to my dead mother.
Mama died for me... I'm sorry... I'm sorry.

But Lorraine shook her head. “Your mother wanted to protect you, Daichan. So even though she died... she surely doesn't resent you. She doesn't resent you at all.”
Her gentle yet powerful voice caused the swirling aurora to fade.
The cathedral trembled as if in agony, slowly beginning to melt.
Gents turned a bewildered face toward Lorraine in the sky. “No... please stop!”
But Lorraine paid no heed to the Demon. With a gaze more noble than that of a goddess's, she cried out as if to rouse Daiga.
“I feel the same. If my death ends the fighting, then so be it. Thank you, Dai-chan. For protecting me this far.”
Lorraine's compassionate expression overlapped with that of Ōga's mother.
“I want to end Dai-chan's fighting. That's why...”
Her clear voice echoed through the cathedral as Lorraine spread her arms wide.
Eyes filled with resolve. Daiga, realizing this, wanted to deny her intention.
Why does everyone protect me?
Why does everyone die for me?
I'm sick of being protected. Even if it ends the fight...
“Then… I’ll just slash you down!!”
Exploding Blood Souls became a crimson light, unleashed from Daiga's entire body.
It severed the aurora and instantly scorched the cathedral's inner walls.
Gents, struck directly by the light, was blown away and slammed into the charred wall.
Glimmering blood spattered from his mouth as he was half embedded in the wall.
"Gah-h-h!”
“Dai-chan...!” Lorraine, freed from her curse, floated down from the air.
Dai-ga caught her naked body with his arms, glowing bright red.
“I'm done watching women die right in front of me!” Daiga stated curtly, setting Lorraine down on the spot, then he used the jacket he was wearing to cover the girl's naked body.
“Even if she forgives me...”
“Dai-chan...” Even at a time like this, Lorraine threw herself into Daiga's chest.
The forgotten scent of the girl's hair. Just that alone felt like it had revived him.
Then, around the two who gazed at each other, the cathedral began to collapse with a loud crash. As the roots melted away, Genz squeezed out a voice full of regret.
“If it ends here, I can't face the dead Katarina and Vow...”
The body that had once deflected Daiga's blade was now visibly pushed to the brink of death. What the hell was this power just now? Even Daiga doesn't understand.
Yet there was no despair in Gentsu's eyes, and his withered right hand still held life.
“The tattoo is already carved. We can redo it as many times as needed.”
“Tattoo...?” At those words, Lorraine's eyes widened.
Then the tattooed woman began to move, sliding across the girl's skin.
She passed over her shoulder, appearing on the small swell of her breast.
Looking up at the stunned Lorraine, the tattooed woman grinned.
For the first time, the girl faced the reason she was being targeted.
"Dai-chan, this...!"
“...Don't worry about it now. We'll get through this.”

Tattoo Blade
Tattoos and minutes, two destinies

Holding her back, Daiga channeled Blood Souls into the Suzaku blade once more.
More than ever before, the crimson blade felt reassuringly strong.
But Gents too, with his withered hand, raised a black saber.
“The name of my cursed legacy is: Istvan's Right Hand!”
From that withered right hand, another black flash crawled out, coiling around Gents' arm. The light, reaching his chest, instantly transformed into a black breastplate.
Then his arms, his abdomen—Gentsu's body was covered in jet-black armor.
“The Holy King's right hand shall never yield!”
Gentsu, now a heavy knight, swung his saber down once more.
This time, he's even putting the weight of his armor into the blade. Fast. And heavy. Fighting him head-on is far too disadvantageous.
Just as he made that judgment, the moment Daiga leapt back dramatically—
“And my illusions are far from exhausted!”
Simultaneously with Gentsu's voice, a figure leapt out behind Daiga.
That form, that jet-black saber... It was the spitting image of Gentsu.
Lorraine screamed at the sight of another demonic figure materializing from the void.
“Daiga, behind you!”
Noticing the threat, the two Gents charged, sandwiching Daiga.
“Though illusions, their power remains the same! Can you cut through us?! Can you evade my duplicates?!”
The demonic figures, acting as one, attacked Daiga with perfectly timed lunges.
To avoid friendly fire, they subtly shifted their timing.
That saber sliced through Daiga's shoulder and anither slashed across his chest.
Blood spattered upward. The searing pain robbed him of focus, and the Phoenix Blade vanished. Realizing his predicament, Daiga shoved Lorraine's back.
“Reiko's over there... Go now!” The moment he shouted, his body swayed violently.
He had no blood left to shed. Realizing this, Lorraine and the demon horde cried out.
“No, Dai-chan! You can't...!”
“No blade, no victory!” “You're defeated, Daiga!”
The two Gents thrust their sabers forward once more.
But before anyone could react, Daiga had already ignited apitch-black light in both hands. Rising to his feet, Daiga met the advancing sabers with his bare hands.
“Even without a blade, my blood remains!”
Incredibly, Daiga caught the black sabers with his fingers alone.
What he wielded in both hands was the shield of Genbu.
His fists enveloped the saber's force, crackling and sending black sparks flying.
But the two demons sensed Daiga's weakness.
“Did you think that pitiful strength could cut through us?!”
“Don't underestimate us! Your cheap tricks won't work!”
The two Gents poured their entire strength into their sabers.
But that very instant was the lapse in guard Oga had been waiting for.
Dai guided the thrusting blade tip to cross paths with his own.
Without resisting the flow, he deflected both forces in an instant.

Then Gentsu's blade pierced the clone, and the clone's blade pierced Gentsu.
The demonic hordes, their strength exploited against each other, faced each other and screamed.
“You fool!” With that cry, the clone vanished first.
From Gentsu's remaining body, jet-black armor bubbled up like boiling liquid.
Writhing in the searing heat and the pain of the saber, Gentsu clawed at his own flesh.
“After coming this far... after coming this far!”
Lorraine clung to Daiga as he retreated.
Before his very eyes, Gentsu was engulfed in black flames.
The suction cups all over his body screamed in agony, burning and melting away.
Then, on his scorched chest, a distinct human form appeared.
A black skeleton tattoo, bearing the likeness of a Magyar noble.
It let out a scream distinct from Gentsu's and began writhing on his skin.
“This isn't the end, Hououji Taiga!” With the scream, the skeleton tattoo began swelling on Gentsu's skin. Conversely, Gentsu's body started shriveling, burning away like scrap paper. Soon, as the tattoo gained substance, it lifted its upper body from Gentsu's corpse.
“Even if few awaken, your battle will not end until all three hundred and sixty Heavenly Demon Clans, all seventy-two Netherworld Demon Clans... all one hundred and eight Demon Clans are utterly annihilated!”
Three hundred and sixty Heavenly Demon Clans. Daiga was astonished by the number.
Could there still be dozens of others somewhere in the world possessing power like Gentsu's? Satisfied with Daiga's astonishment, the skeleton tattoo let out a roaring laugh. “I too shall return, having gained a new host! I will definitely return!”
All could do was watch in terror as the skeleton tattoo melted away.
Then, black vapor erupted from the skeleton's body, engulfing the area in a blinding flash.
“Get down!”
Daiga leapt sideways, scooping Lorraine into his arms as they rolled to the ground.
A black blast wave swept over them, slamming Reiko and the others to the floor with the impact. The shattered cathedral still trembled, its outer walls collapsing.
When the shaking finally ceased, Daiga was stunned by the transformed surroundings.
The demon horde's controlled area was gone, replaced by the sprawling underground drainage facilities of Tsukiji Market.
“...Did we win?” Supported by Lorraine, Daiga staggered to his feet.
Then Lorraine turned a gentle smile toward Daiga.
“Kill me, Da-chan...” Lorraine spoke as if she understood everything.
“If there really are one hundred and eight demons, Da-chan will have to keep fighting forever.”
I don't want that. Lorraine shed tears for Daiga, who stood frozen.
"Because of me, Dai-chan will fight his whole life... ...and so many others die? I can't bear it. Please... end it all with your sword, Da-chan."
Lorraine quietly opened the front of the shirt she'd been given to wear.
Before Daiga stood the naked body of a girl, and the woman with the writhing tattoos.

Daiga remained silent for a moment.
My fight ends. My suffering ends.
But Lorraine's words met with Daiga's refusal.
“It's not over.” He said this as he quietly closed Lorraine's collar.
“My power isn't for cutting you down. It's for protecting you.”
“But Dai-chan...”
“If I cut you down, I'll suffer forever. Fighting forever is far better.”
“Besides”, he added, exhaling hot breath. “Your suffering is just beginning. I'll suffer with you.”
“Dai-chan...”
“You saved me. Now it's my turn. I'll save you... There has to be a way. Let's go find it.”
“But... if the people of the world suffer because of me...”
“Then curse me too. We'll always be together.”
Daiga felt no fear or hesitation anymore.
Rather, Lorraine—who had remained resolute until now—felt her heart waver at the future awaiting them. Daiga embraced the girl's slender frame, as if to calm her turmoil. Holding Lorraine's frozen body close, Daiga closed his eyes.
He thought – “We have no choice but to face it. Both Lorraine and I.”
Daiga's resolve flowed through his arms, drawing the trembling girl even tighter to him.

【Epilogue 1】

“Hey, what are you going to do, Dai-chan?” Lorraine turned back in the sunlight.
“I'll treat you to ice cream, since it's your discharge celebration.”
“Thanks. I'll have the cranberry one. Oh, and a mixed ice cream with natto and chocolate.
Oga said this, extending his bandaged arm.
Sunday afternoon. The clear skies over the Meiji Shrine Outer Gardens bustled with families.
Sitting on a bench, feeling the early summer breeze, Daiga's grandfather asked him.
“So you've really made up your mind, Daiga?”
“Don't ask me that now. That's not like you.”
Daiga yawned widely at the old rogue sitting in his wheelchair.
“Besides, I think I know what I'm doing.”
A week had passed since the deadly battle at Tsukiji.
Even Daiga, renowned for his astonishing resilience, still felt pain in his limbs.
But even if his wounds healed, Daiga felt no sense of security.
He sought a way to save Lorraine. That was the path Daiga had chosen.
“I don't know how long it'll take. Or if it'll even work out.”
“That's why I'm doing it. Even if it means traveling the entire world, I don't care.”
Of course, anxiety swirled within Daiga's heart too.
But together, the two of them could face it.
No matter what happens.
Seeing the conviction on Daiga's face, the rogue let out a deep sigh.
“Don't try to shoulder everything alone. You can rely on Hadley and Reiko too.”

“And Grandpa's still here.” Daiga's heart ached for his grandfather, whose wounds had yet to heal. How long could his grandfather, who had mastered the Phoenix-style martial arts, keep fighting? And how long would he keep pushing him to train?
As if to drown out the overwhelming loneliness, Daiga shifted his gaze.
Lorraine was running through the early summer greenery.
Her blonde hair and white shirt glistened in the sunlight, sparkling brightly.
Then, as if noticing Daiga's gaze, Lorraine turned back lightly.
“Da-chan... are you watching me?”
“Yeah, I am.” Daiga said, remembering the girl's conviction.
The conviction of the girl... and the boy.

“I solemnly swear before all gathered here:
I shall live a pure life and faithfully fulfill my duties.
I shall abstain from all poisonous and harmful substances, neither using nor knowingly recommending harmful drugs.
I shall strive to uphold the highest standards of my profession to the best of my ability.
In the course of my duties, I shall keep confidential all private matters of those under my care, and all family secrets I may learn.
I shall wholeheartedly assist physicians and dedicate myself to the welfare of those entrusted to my care."
The Nightingale Pledge

【Epilogue 2】

Military boots clattered across the concrete floor.
Then a knock. The man who entered raised his right hand high in salute.
“Reporting to you, Your Excellency.”
“From Tokyo, then. What did he say?”
In the cold darkness, a rustling sound could be heard.
The man called the Führer quietly swiveled his chair to face the other.
“Did Gentsu's Trinity Squad accomplish the task?”
“No. Unfortunately, it seems they failed.”
“Ah… Has the grandson of Hououji Temple’s rogue grown more formidable since fourteen years ago?”
“However, it is said that the girl we seek has grown even more splendidly.”
A large scar ran diagonally across the face of the man who delivered the report.
The Führer smiled, spreading his arms wide to welcome his words.
“You accomplished numerous feats under the previous Führer. You rescued the imprisoned Mussolini with a surprise attack, earning the reputation as Europe's most dangerous man. It seems your time to act is near. Should you command it, my own Trinity Squadr stands ready to act at any moment.”
Nodding deeply, the Supreme Leader rose from his chair.
“So the gate was indeed there?”
“Yes. The tattoo has already been engraved.”

“Marvelous... Marvelous news indeed.” The Supreme Leader reached for his handkerchief to press it to his eyes, then stopped himself.
Instead, he only sighed, his breath laden with the weight of years of toil.
“The sacrifices made to reach this point were immense.”
“They say the greater the joy, the greater the suffering that precedes it.”
“Words of Augustus, the first emperor of Rome, Scorzeny.”
Mentioning the name, the Führer turned his gaze toward the dark wall.
“It means that to seize the seat of power, one must overcome great hardship. Then I too shall ascend to the throne of the first emperor. Of the Fourth German Reich.”
Three portraits hung side by side on the wall, illuminated by a faint light.
Frederick the Great of the 18th century, who fought through the Seven Years' War and transformed the small state of Prussia into a great power.
Bismarck, the Iron Chancellor of the 19th century, who led Prussia to victory in the Franco-Prussian War and established the German Empire.
And the Bohemian corporal of the 20th century who nearly dominated Europe.
The Führer stood tall and saluted the predecessor who had entrusted him with his last will.
“Long live the former Führer!”
“Long live the current Führer!”
The Führer smiled at Otto Skorzeny, who raised his right hand.
Beneath their feet, the floor was painted with a detailed world map.
Overlaying the map was a large coat of arms—a massive hooked cross.

【Afterword by Takeo Ichikawa】

I finally wrote it. The protagonist I'd always wanted to write about. A strong, resilient, and kind boy. What I had in mind was a hero bearing a sword, protecting a half-naked beauty. I wanted to unleash things of myth and legend to run wild in the modern world. My thoughts and ideas bubbled and boiled until finally, Daiga Hououji was born. A boy as beautiful as a god, as strong as a demon. The strongest samurai born into a bloodline of destiny. To protect a beautiful girl, he wields sword and magic, slicing through sinister demons - he also battles his own past, overcoming the scars within his heart. That's the kind of man I wanted to write about.

Then the heroine should be a gentle yet strong woman too - the hint came from my friend. He suffered life-threatening injuries in a motorcycle accident - the emergency room where he was rushed in resembled a field hospital, they say. During his month-long hospitalization there, he was deeply moved by the nurses working with such dedication. Their presence, staying by the side of patients in agony and offering words of encouragement, seemed noble to him. Yeah, this too is a hero's story. That's what I thought when I created Lorraine.

Now, once you've imbued your protagonist with purpose, you need a worthy adversary. That's why I chose the Nazis. Nazis mean dictatorship, racial discrimination,

ideological suppression, wars of aggression. They're the perfect foe for a modern hero to fight, aren't they? Especially since I've been a wargamer for over twenty years - when I hear “German forces,” countless battlefields and weapons come to mind. Look forward not only to the hero's story, but also to the antagonist's.

Ah, I can already hear your voices 【Tsukkomi】 coming in.

“A beautiful girl, swords, and magic? Isn't that way too cliché?”

“The heroine being a roommate is also pretty common.”

“A story where Nazis are the enemy? I read that kind of thing twenty years ago.”

Yes, I'm well aware of all that. But you see..... I wanted to write this story!

No matter what anyone says, heroes and beautiful girls are the ultimate classic trope! I want to take on this simple yet powerful story head-on! I want to throw a straight fastball right at your hearts! So what if the Nazis are the enemy! I want to write about the German army! I want to charge forward, aiming for that classic path!

(Partly delivered in the style of Sambomaster)

Well, I'd better stop here before I get carried away. Not just with this novel, but I'll keep that in mind. But I really do love the classic approach - writing stories everyone can enjoy. I hope you'll continue to support me.

And then, then, I'd like to thank illustrator Yumito Ueda here. From the very first rough sketches, Lorraine was just so adorable. Seeing how much fun he was having drawing her made me smile too. Honestly, I was blown away (laugh). I'm sure many of you picked up this book after seeing Lorraine's artwork. Ueda-san is also active with Fujimi Shobo's “Magna Spectra” card game - he shares various illustrations on his personal homepage, so if you have a computer, please do visit.

Well, I intend to deliver the next volume as soon as possible. After all, in my head, Daiga and Lorraine are waiting for their turn - and then there's a new character itching to get out there. As the author, I can only pour my blood and soul into the manuscript like Daiga. My weapons against the mainstream are sheer determination and grit. I'm prepared to carve this path by sacrificing myself and lead you all along it. It'll be fine. Daiga and Lorraine won't bore you.

February 9, 2005

On Lorraine Rosenberg's birthday

Translator's note:

Hi guys! NineSoulsSea here, hope you enjoyed this translation of **Takeo Ichikawa**'s masterpiece, **TATTOO BLADE**! I would like to say a big thank you to **aNobody101** for providing me with the raws for the light novel from Bookwalker - without him, this translation would've never existed! There's also a sequel, **TATTOO BLADE 2**, that I'll get to translating soon - first the preview, then the full thing! It's such a shame that Takeo's stuff never got any adaptation - be it manga or anime. At least judging from **TATTOO BLADE**, it would be perfect for either. I don't have the necessary skills to make a good manga adaptation for it either, but, maybe, one day...

And that's about it! Thank you for reading and have a very TATTOO day!